



# **AUTHENTIC** *Science* **FICTION**

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**EARTH OUR  
NEW EDEN**

*By F.G. Rayer*

**INSIDE-** *Forrest J. Ackerman  
writes from America*

# AUTHENTIC

# Science

# FICTION

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NUMBER TWENTY

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Editor: Derrick Rowles      Technical Editor: H. J. Campbell,  
F.C.S., F.R.H.S., M.S.C.I.

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## COVERS

Among the many things that science fiction fans take seriously are covers. This is understandable because in some ways the cover of a magazine or book sets the tone of the whole production. Covers can raise a fiction-form to the heights, or drag it down to the gutter. Unhappily, the latter is what has sometimes happened in Britain.

While some American covers come in for criticism for the preponderance of space maidens and "bug-eyed" monsters, there are many notable exceptions. It is these exceptions that have put science fiction into the American public's eye as a readable proposition. In America, science fiction has taken its place beside other accepted literary forms.

Here in England, we are in a transitional phase, where science fiction is moving up rapidly. This is a very recent development. A year ago, the very publishers, film studios and radio men who are now clamouring for science fiction would not have entertained the idea for a second. Many of them were approached—with reactions that were very near open contempt.

It is difficult to blame them, for their sole experience of science fiction was via the medium of paper-backs, fronted with lurid and sensational covers. In most cases, the con-

tents were of a similar kind. A very understandable prejudice arose against science fiction and it has taken a good deal of effort on the part of many people to live it down. We feel that AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION has played a leading role in this metamorphosis. From the beginning we have aimed at covers that suit the quality of our stories and are not mill-stones impeding science fiction's climb to recognition.

Of course, it took time. There were few first-class artists in the country who had experience in this kind of work. But we persevered, and we know from the many letters we have received that our efforts have not gone unnoticed. Most of you agree with us that our covers are second to none and compare well with the best American SF productions. If there are any of you who disagree with this idea, we'd be pleased to hear from you—with sound critical support for *your* ideas.

Meanwhile, we bring you the work of another top-line British artist who signs himself Vann. We think he is good, because his treatment is refreshing and packed with interest. Do you agree? We want your views on these things because we can then give you the covers you like. Now, let's have a couple of thousand letters!

—EDITOR

## *Terms of interest to the science-fictioneer*

**Absolute**—not relative. Independent of all scale and comparisons. E.g., zero temperature; number.

**Acceleration**—rate of change of velocity. Increasing velocity is positive acceleration; decreasing velocity is negative acceleration. Acceleration of any body falling to Earth in a vacuum is 32 feet per second per second (average).

**Achromatic**—applied to optical apparatus which gives images free from coloured fringes. A-lenses have one lens of crown glass and one of flint glass. The flint lens corrects dispersion caused by the crown glass.

**Aerolite** — (sometimes called "aerolith"). A stony meteorite, as distinct from a metallic one.

**Albedo**—a measure of the brightness of celestial bodies. Technically, it is the amount of light a body reflects in proportion to the amount that falls on it. The Moon's albedo is 7%; that of Venus 65%.

**Aldebaran**—a star of the first magnitude in the constellation of Taurus. The brightest star near the Pleiades. Much used in navigation.

**Alpha rays**—streams of high-velocity Helium nuclei, composed of two neutrons and two protons (alpha particles) emitted from radio-active elements. Produce ionisation in gases they pass through and are easily absorbed by matter.

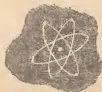
**Angstrom unit**—a distance of ten to the tenth metre. One ten-thousandth of a micron. A unit of distance used mostly as measurements of electromagnetic wavelengths.

**Aphelion**—the point on the Earth's orbit where it is at greatest distance from the Sun. Actually, there are two such positions, one at each end of the ellipse. These positions correspond to summer and winter. (From "ap" meaning away, and "helios" meaning the Sun.)

**Apogee**—the point in the orbit of any celestial body at which it is farthest from Earth. The Sun is in apogee when the Earth is at aphelion. (From "geos" meaning Earth.)

**Asteroids**—a belt of minor planets circling the Sun between Mars and Jupiter. There are over 1,500 of them, but none is much larger than 300 miles in diameter. On October 30th, 1937, the asteroid Hermes came within 485,000 miles of Earth—closer than any celestial body except the Moon. Hermes is only one mile in diameter.

H. J. C.



## FORREST J. ACKERMAN writes from America . . .

Exactly half my life ago I attended the charter meeting of the Los Angeles Science Fiction League—and have been going once a week ever since. Seventeen years later, it is known as the LA Science Fantasy Society. As an entity it has survived 750 meetings, and on 3rd January, 1952, I was one of the 40 fans present to celebrate the accomplishment. Ray Bradbury gave a speech; other sf writers included E. Everett Evans, L. Major Reynolds, Floyd Wallace, Rog Phillips and Mari Wolf.

An anthology of Science Fiction Art is being assembled by Mort Weisinger, one-time sf magazine editor, and Julius Schwartz, the original sf agent. There will be several hundred illustrations, many of them in colour, by Paul, Finlay, Bok, Dold, Leydenfrost, Cartier and Bonestell, and all the prime favourites. Price—fortify yourself!—£3 15s.

Geo. Gallet, French fan No. 1, reports John Beynon's *Stow-away to Mars* and Ron Hubbard's *Death's Deputy* translated there. Festus Pragnell's English classic *Green Men of Graynec* will be published in Germany. *The Blind Spot* will be issued in England by Museum Press. In Mexico, Mexifan No. 1, Antonio Helu, has selected S. Fowler Wright's *Automata* and H. G. Wells' *The Treasure of Mr. Brisher* for issue No. 34 of *Los Cuentos Fantásticos*.

Adele Camandi, whose films "Christmas in Connecticut" and "Three Smart Girls" you may remember, has done an

original story screen play which I'm handling called "Venus Calling." And A. E. van Vogt and G. Gordon Dewey have collaborated and given me a screen story synopsis entitled "Destination Earth!" I hear that Geo. Orwell's fantasy novel "Animal Farm" will be produced as a full-length movie on your side of the big pond.

Seen in a Stateside bookshop: one table of new and second-hand volumes labelled "Science Fiction," another table featuring supernatural stories bearing the sign *Science Fiction!*

For the second time a professional magazine has helped itself to the title of a fanzine. Both times the magazines so honoured have been Los Angeles products. The first was *Imagination*, a title contributed by myself for the first club organ of the LA group. The second, now serving for a new prozine, is *IF*, the brain-child of Con Pederson.

Flashes—A. E. van Vogt will have six books published this year . . . a comedy will be filmed called "The Day the Earth Turned Backward" . . . Superfan Don Day has prepared a book-form index of the first 25 years of American sf mags—a checklist of approximately 45 periodicals, covering 1,500 issues, with over 20,000 entries! *Science fiction rockets on!*

4s]

Read the latest American sf news on this page every month. Forrest J. Ackerman (4s7) writes this feature exclusively for **AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION**.

# EARTH OUR NEW EDEN

*By F. G. Rayer*

## CHAPTER ONE

THE workers' city hummed like the inside of a great machine. Lighted vehicles sped through the murmuring tunnels, which made a network on four levels. Peter Wrey emerged from a hewn passage into a large tunnel which extended straight as a line through the city, and stood on the narrow, raised sideway, waiting. His light blue eyes glinted in the naked whiteness of the strings of overhead bulbs, but his face betrayed no emotion. It was not wise that it should, he thought. An official might be watching—and outward signs of discontent could lead to interrogation.

A long, low vehicle drawing three trailers laden with machine parts swept past, and Peter went on towards a narrow platform where a passenger trolley following the southward route would halt. Twenty-eight and born in the nursery blocks at the lowest level, he was nevertheless conscious of the hundreds of feet of granite extending above the city to ground level. He wondered if any man could have a hate which equalled his for this subterranean catacomb in which he lived and laboured. The air pulsed with the rumble of the machine shops, and smelt of oil, steel, rubber and electricity. Never came day or night, but only the end to his ten-hour shifts, to be followed by rest, sleep, then renewed labour. The city was never still, its tunnels never dark. The flow of workers hurrying along the sideways, or riding stolid-faced in the passenger vehicles, never ceased. Nothing showed whether the earth above was bathed in summer sunshine, or dark and cool under a starlit sky. Nor did the coming of winter or spring make itself felt in the underground city, where the air was always at the temperature the medical block considered best, and the only light the stark, unwinking blaze of endless strings of overhead bulbs stretching farther than the eye could see.

A passenger trolley stopped and he entered it, taking a seat at the very back of the half-empty interior. A man nodded, smiling, his tired eyes turning from empty contemplation of the tunnel walls.

"Going back to your shift, Peter?"

Peter nodded, examining the other, noting the many wrinkles upon his small face, the complete greyness of his hair, and the weariness of his voice. He wondered why he had not noticed those things more vividly before.

"Yes," he said.

Sam Ravenloe looked sideways at him. "Been in trouble?"

Peter had not known that the single word could convey so much. He stared through the window at the brown walls of hewn rock, interrupted at regular intervals only by intersecting ways which extended away out of sight. He bit a lip.

"Were you born down here, Sam?" He felt amazed at the bitterness in his own voice. "Are you content with this—with working, eating and sleeping as others direct?"

"We have a weekly relaxation period," Ravenloe said quietly.

"To listen to mechanical music, or try to pretend we're happy in one of the cinemas below!"

They were silent while the vehicle halted. Four workmen, similarly dressed in drab brown, got off, and the passenger trolley sped on. Ravenloe looked at Peter.

"We have plenty of food. We never want for anything. You must learn to be content, Peter. The work's not too hard—we have machines to do so much."

Peter got up. He had to alight at the next stop. "You're pretending," he said, "and it doesn't take me in. You like it no more than I do!"

Sam Ravenloe examined him, sudden comprehension in his kindly eyes. "Is it—Judy?" he asked abruptly.

The vehicle slowed; a bell rang, and Peter hastened to the exit. Passenger trolleys did not wait while workers talked over their private worries or annoyances. . . . From the plat-

form he waved to Sam as the vehicle started off, and watched it disappear ahead into the maze of lights.

Judy, he thought. Old Sam was near the mark. But it was not Judy, it was the autocratic bosses who said that Judy and he were not suited, and must not marry!

"To hell with them!" Peter said under his breath.

He went down a tunnel which led towards a sound like muted drumming. The rock walls quivered under the impact of the mighty forging machines behind them, and the air was heavy with the smell of scorching metal. Face bleak, he went through swing doors into an office, where a clerk sat behind a personnel index machine, waiting to check him in. Peter drew his card from his drab brown overall, and dropped it into the slot. The clerk looked up.

"Wrey. P. Machinist?"

"Yes."

"The supervisor wishes to speak to you. Turn right: second door on left."

Peter went on. No use to ask the clerk why, when all orders came into his office as code letters on a card. The second door bore the words "*Welcome, brother worker, we labour with and for you.*"

He opened the door. A man in a blue overall sat behind a broad desk. Wide across the shoulders, and with a wide, round face, he leaned back heavily in his chair. Peter saw that his card was on the desk; it had preceded him by moments through an air tube from the outer office. The man beamed, but Peter knew that was all one with the notice on the door.

"We know you are not content here, Wrey," he said.

Peter started. Had it been so obvious? The supervisor leaned forward, his elbows on the desk, his eyes keen.

"We have the well-being of all workers at heart," he said. "We have noticed a falling off in your personal efficiency of late."

"It's the monotony," Peter interposed.

The supervisor made a sound of mild rebuke. "An efficient worker should never feel it monotonous to do well a task for



which he is fitted. However, you are young. Your card shows that it is five years since you visited the surface, and then only for a single day. We realise occasional, slight feelings of—of irksomeness may arise. Because of that, we have decided to offer you transference.”

Peter felt shaken as by a torrent of anger. This was all part of the complex mechanism of administration—and a plan to part him from Judy. . . .

“I do not wish to be transferred to another city,” he said stiffly.

“Nevertheless, we consider it best.”

The other’s eyes were keenly on him under bushy brows, and Peter compressed his lips. This was how it had always been—an iron fist in a velvet glove. If he rebelled, his issue of food-tickets would cease. The tunnels which emerged to surface level would be barred to him, and every friend become an enemy. A few—very few—had escaped to the world above, to live like animals in the wooded hills miles to the south.

The supervisor leaned back, indicating that the interview was at an end.

“Instructions will be passed through almost immediately,” he said.

Peter turned and left, silent with an effort. Open resistance at this stage would only reduce his chances, he thought, fiercely. Erect, walking like an automaton, he passed along a lit corridor and into a wider tunnel. He had traversed the latter four times a day every day since the age of sixteen, when the instructional block had passed him out as a grade one apprentice. Ahead lay the machine shops. . . .

The air sang with the rotation of machine tools and high-speed shafting. The concrete floor vibrated, quivering with the shock of the presses in the adjacent bay. Peter stood before a lathe which rang and whined and sent out a cata-ract of white hot metal shards that spat and tattooed on the guard like hail. He wiped his face, lifting his heavy goggles, and whirled a control wheel with his left hand. A brilliant

steel turning dropped from the lathe into a chute; metal arms moved, advancing a new casting towards the spinning headstock, where calipers like a strange insect's claws closed to hold it.

Each side of him in long lines men tended machines that rent steel like putty. They never looked up from their machines; were never still. Nor did they ever look at the long signs on the facing walls: "*Productivity brings happiness and plenty. In work well done lies joy.*"

Sparks spattered against the guard, and Peter turned the control handles with practised skill. Transference, he thought. If once he lost Judy, he would never see her again.

The lathe whined on. Turning after turning, machined to a silvery polish, disappeared into the chute. Peter thought of the world above. His father, now a dim memory, had told him how industry had been moved below the surface to protect it from aerial attack. It had seemed a good plan, then. There had been no war and no attack, but the workers' cities had not returned to surface level. Instead, they had grown into a myriad of subterranean tunnellings, every year more and more vast.

Peter bit his lip, lifted the guard an inch from its hooks, and slid his hand underneath. Rotating steel seared his fingers; flecks of his blood spattered against the shield. He jumped back, flicking a switch which lit a red bulb above his head. A man came from behind the ranks of machines. Not speaking, because his voice would have been unheard, he took his position at the controls. Peter stepped back, winding his handkerchief tightly round his hand. The substitute who had taken his place did not look at him.

Peter left the machine shop quickly. Outside the door a supervisor in blue stopped him.

"Cut hand," Peter said. "The guard wasn't in position."

He wondered whether Judy would still be in the medical annex, or whether they had already moved her. The long corridor was quiet and cool, after the machine bays. The end door bore a little notice: "*Accidents arise from carelessness, and can be avoided.*"

He pressed a button, waiting. The door opened. A girl with dark hair stood behind it. Her brown eyes looked up at him.

"Peter." Her small mouth framed the word silently, and he saw that a matron was in the room.

"Cut hand," he said, and began to unwind the handkerchief.

They did not speak. He watched Judy fetch bandages from a cabinet, and make an entry in a record book. She began to dress the wound, bending low over his hand. The matron closed a file with a snap.

"If I am wanted I shall be in the surgeon's room, Miss Kimble."

Judy looked up. "Yes, matron."

Peter waited until the door closed with a click. They were alone. Judy looked at him, and he saw that there was the sparkle of moisture in her eyes.

"I—wanted to see you, Peter," she breathed. "They—they're going to move me to another city."

Peter was shocked into silence, though he knew that he was wasting valuable moments. Tears now stood unashamed in Judy's eyes.

"That means—we may never see each other again, Peter." Her lips trembled. She began to wind on the bandage. "I've known folk who've been parted like this—they've never seen each other again, ever."

"That's not going to happen to us!" Peter declared. "They said they are going to move me, too. That's why I came! Are you ready to take a chance with me?"

She examined him intently, nodding. "In the woods . . . ?"

"If there's no other way."

A shadow came upon the frosted glass of the door, and Judy began to tie the bandage hastily. Peter stood up.

"Until tonight," he whispered. "Wait for the 37 trolley. I'll tell you what I've planned."

A surgeon came in, and Judy completed the bandaging in silence.

Outside, Peter turned smartly and retraced his way along

the passage. Half-formed schemes floated through his mind, each to be dismissed in turn. Escapes *had* been made, he told himself. The best plan seemed to lie in hiding on one of the trailers which were taken up the long, sloping tunnels to surface level. Afterwards, Judy and he would have to take what chance offered.

The hours dragged slowly by. He worked automatically, half his mind engaged on the problem that had suddenly become so urgent. The machines whined and thundered, and turning after turning disappeared into the chute. His arms ached and his eyes smarted under the goggles. Perspiration dewed his forehead, and he wondered if the end of his shift would never come.

At last the siren wailed above the thrumming machines. He stepped back; another man took his place, bending over the controls of the screaming lathe.

Outside, the supervisor stopped him. "Wrey. P. You're wanted in the embarkation depot."

Peter froze, his muscles tensing. Two burly men in uniform stepped out from beside the door, one each side him. Too late, Peter thought. Too late. Resistance was utterly useless and futile. If he was to accomplish anything, it would be by stealth, and by out-thinking his bosses, not by getting dumped into solitary-confinement to cool off.

"As you wish——" he said.

The plane rose smoothly into the evening sky, and Peter looked below through the cabin window. The airfield lay near the tunnel exits from the deep-lying city. Away south, dark on the horizon, were the wooded hills to which he had hoped to escape. But escape had been impossible. He had been brought to the surface in a saloon, under guard, and escorted to the waiting plane, already loaded with its full complement of passengers and crew. He was aware, now, of the two officers at the rear of the cabin. Both were watchful, authoritative, and used to dealing with the most unexpected forms of attempted escape.

He wondered what Judy would think when she rode homeward on the 37 trolley—and found he wasn't there.

A little man occupied the adjacent seat. "You're from below," he said.

Peter nodded. Scattered buildings stood above the workers' city, and he judged the little man to be an office clerk in one of them. He was mild, with faded eyes and thick glasses, and carried a slender brown document case.

They rose slowly higher and the hills and buildings dropped away behind. Peter gazed below with a sense of wonder. The open spaces, the very sky, were things only distantly remembered.

"You won't have heard of the green twilights, down there," the clerk said. "You may be lucky enough to see one—there's no cloud, and it'll be dark in an hour or so."

Peter looked at him, puzzled, wondering if he had misunderstood something the other had said.

"Green twilights?"

"Ah, I thought you wouldn't have heard!" The man placed the case upon his knees. "They began about a week ago—it's some kind of aurora borealis—northern lights, you know—in my opinion. Beautiful. Been getting stronger every night."

"I—hadn't heard," Peter said.

He did not say that life in the workers' cities left little time for idle speculation, and that discussion of affairs in the world above was not encouraged. Films shown in the cinemas were all set in workers' cities since one tumultuous night of his boyhood, when the first showing of a film of sunlit fields and beautiful seaside towns had caused a minor riot.

He compressed his lips. "We're not supposed to bother about what goes on up here," he said. "Tell me about it."

"Nobody really knows the cause." The man appeared pleased to talk. "Everybody who could has watched. It's beautiful." He peered over Peter's shoulder. The sun was low. "If you ask me, we shall get a fine view, just now," he said. "I'm not sure if it isn't beginning already."

He blinked through his glasses and Peter stared from the cabin window. The sun would soon be going down. Already its rays were slanting obliquely through the atmosphere, and there actually did seem to be a faint, greenish tint to the air.

"It'll be a sight, if it's like last night," the man said with enthusiasm. "We'll get a splendid view, up here."

As they sped on, the earth below was enveloped in purple, its features fading away in the increasing dimness. At many points lights showed, twinkling from houses and vehicles.

Peter lifted his eyes. Soon the sun would be upon the horizon, and the green tint was definitely there. With every passing minute it grew in intensity, suffusing over the heavens so that they were a deep emerald. The orb of the sun itself became a greenish disc, as if seen through coloured glass.

A hand gripped his arm. "There . . . !"

He did not look away from the amazing greenness which filled the whole eastern sky. The sun went from view, but oblique rays still lit up the heavens, and he expelled his breath at the wonder of it. Once, he remembered, he had seen a red twilight sky, when the whole heavens seemed to take fire from the descending sun. But this was different—and more impressive.

Only slowly did the green colour give way to darkness, fading to a heavy, verdant blue which lingered for a long time until the plane was speeding on through a night sky where stars had begun to appear.

The Earth hung like a mottled sphere in space. In the upper reaches of the enveloping atmosphere drifted infinitely small particles, descending very slowly towards the planet's surface. Green, they had drifted as a body across intergalactic space, forming an irregular cloud thousands of miles in diameter. Under the Earth's gravitational pull the nebula moved slowly into the planetary orbit, diffusing in a layer through the stratosphere. As night and day came across the hemispheres of the Earth, they spread through the air, minute seed spores that had lain dormant in the void while young

suns had waxed and waned. Almost as light as the air itself, they settled slowly, reflecting a greenish tint when the sun struck obliquely through their layers.

Though dormant so long, life was beginning to stir within them. Their cells began to absorb oxygen molecules, combining them under a strange photo-synthesis during the hours of daylight. Always they sank slowly earthwards, enveloping the planet from meridian to meridian and pole to pole. Though miles still above the Earth's surface, their descent continued—would continue, until they reached soil, sand, rock or snow to which they could adhere. No part of the planet would be free from them. They would descend on hot equatorial deserts, and frigid polar wastelands; would send out rootlets, taking up their tenure upon the planet which had been molten lava during the epoch when their infinitely long journey had commenced.

Their life processes, so long inactive, began to awake with increasing speed. Alien, strange, numerous beyond all counting, they drifted down. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

THE plane sloped down towards the brilliantly lit airfield, touched earth almost imperceptibly, and taxied across to the hangars. Peter stretched his limbs, conscious that the guards at the rear of the cabin had awakened to full vigilance.

He was escorted to a waiting vehicle, and they sped away along a wide arterial road.

"We hope you'll be happy here, and like your work," one of the guards said.

Peter did not answer, but wondered whether they could see the twist of derision on his lips, and the anger and scorn in his eyes. They passed between trees, and swept into a concreted square. A door in a high, frowning building opened; guards led him through corridors which echoed to the heavy thud of their boots, and a further door was unlocked.

"We hope you'll be comfortable here, until morning."

A key turned, and the boots echoed away. Peter eyed the small, square room. The single narrow window was barred. Two bunks, one above the other, were secured to a wall. A steel bench was near a table; both were bolted to the floor. He crossed, looking out through the window. A few lights showed from opposite buildings. Nothing else was visible.

"Welcome to our free city," a voice said.

Peter turned round. A young man was sitting up in the top bunk. He swung legs of amazing length down to the floor, and stood up. With hair dark as jet, and a humorous twinkle in his eyes, he looked down at Peter.

"Another happy worker come to find joy in productivity," he said.



He wore the drab uniform of a worker himself, and Peter's retort died unspoken. A faint hint of sarcasm had been under the words, in self mockery.

"What was your crime—trying to escape?" he asked.

Peter shook his head. Instinctively he liked the other. "They transferred me here, for personal reasons."

The other nodded understandingly. "I see. I've known that happen before. If we're to be room-mates, you may as well know my name. Allen. I decided I was tired of finding joy in productivity—but they caught me."

Peter felt interested. "You actually tried?"

"I did—and shall again. The thing is to appear contented, never give a hint—then take 'em by surprise!" Allen got back onto the top bunk. "We've a short night's sleep, and a long day's work, tomorrow. We must give a good example."

Peter lay down on the lower bunk. Above his head was emblazoned the motto: "*Unwillingness to work is a crime against yourself and your fellows.*"

"There's a lot in what you said," he agreed.

In the next two days they slipped easily into the new routine of labour. Peter found the change of locality invigorating, and the hand of authority was so well concealed that many men would not have noticed its presence, and would have been pleased by the many small apparent concessions. But he knew that he could never be content while Judy was so far away.

They ate in a long hall, clean, bright, with music coming from overhead reproducers. Peter listened to the sound of knives and plates, and to the murmur of many voices.

"This is all part of the system," he said quietly. "A record-player is cheaper than barbed wire and guards! Make conditions tolerable, and most won't try to escape."

Allen nodded. "I know. And the odd thing is that most believe they're *lucky*! There's food and lodging, and amusement of a kind. They swallow all this propaganda, and believe it." He indicated the walls with a jerk of his head.

Peter did not look round. He knew the high announce-

ments too well: "*We are a happy community, where everyone works for the good of all.*"

They ate for a moment in silence.

"We're being watched, you know," Allen said at last. "Don't you think you've taken things a little too quietly?"

Perhaps he had, Peter thought. It could look suspicious. That was a mistake he could easily cover up, without going to extremes which would only endanger them both.

"What do you make of these green twilights?" Allen asked suddenly.

Peter turned his thoughts off at an angle. The green twilight which he had witnessed had seemed a very distant thing—a phenomenon which could never affect them, personally.

"I hadn't thought about it. Some atmospheric condition, I suppose."

"Exactly," Allen agreed. "But *what* condition?"

He let the words trail off, apparently thinking of something else.

"I have a friend who drives one of the trailer lorries," he said, his voice suddenly very low. "He'll be going up with a load two nights from now. He'll take care not to notice us."

Peter looked at Allen sideways. The young face was set in determination, but the eyes were lowered. Peter wondered why his new friend was so anxious to escape.

They returned to work. Peter's mind was only half upon his task as he operated the controls of the machine tool at which he had been placed. Life could not go on like this, he thought. There must come a breaking-point when the workers, by united action, would sweep away the authority which subjugated them. He wondered whether Allen's plan would succeed, and whether his sudden remark about the green twilights had been prompted by any motive or particular thought.

The work seemed endless. The hours dragged. Even when he at last returned to his bed in the men's sleeping block, he could still hear the rumble of machinery. The walls quivered;

there was never complete silence. He was like an insect in a box, he thought, before sleep came.

"This is the one," Allen whispered.

Peter stood with his back pressed against the hewn rock. Below them the roadway sloped on an incline which brought it out to surface level half a mile away. A right-angle corner slowed the single line of vehicles, which had thinned. Many articulated trolleys and trailers had gone past, rumbling by below their feet as they crouched on the ledge from which the overhead lights could be reached. Now, another vehicle, low, but almost as wide as the narrow tunnel, came grinding at reduced speed round the corner. Peter found a hand gripping his arm, and a voice near his ear——

"The second trailer. . . ."

The vehicle passed below, its driver gazing stolidly ahead from his cab. The first trailer it drew passed; the second came below. . . . Peter dropped lightly, and found Allen by his side.

"In among the crates. He's left space near the front."

They dropped out of sight amid metal-bound cases. Peter thought the journey along the tunnel endless, and the wait at the exit unduly long. He heard an official voice, and wondered whether a warning had preceded them. But at last the trailer started forward, and suddenly open night sky was above them, with stars visible against the surrounding wall of crate tops.

"It's a mile to the depot where this load stops," Allen whispered. "We must get off before, but not yet."

They passed between lighted buildings, and under rows of street lamps. Soon the lights fell away behind and Peter knew that the string of trailers had reached open country. At last they slowed to a halt.

"That means us," Allen said.

They jumped down. Peter had a glimpse of a man sitting stolidly in the cab, not looking back, then the vehicle started off. The whine of its engine, and the glow of headlights, disappeared from sight and hearing.

"He's a good chap," Allen said, "but wants to avoid trouble. From here, we're on our own. There's an old deserted hut across the fields. That's our first stop."

They walked quickly away from the road. Thick trees were on their left, and they followed them. A glow as from a window showed ahead, in the fringe of the trees, and Allen made a suppressed exclamation.

"Didn't expect anyone there!"

They went quietly through the trees. The door of the hut stood a little open, and Peter looked through the window. An old man sat before the hearth, rocking himself like a child. His frayed coat, brown with mud, reached to his ankles. Suddenly, as if sensing their presence, he looked round. Eyes like living coals glowed at them, framed in a thin, high-boned face bristling with a heavy beard and matted hair. He rose with amazing agility, coming to the door.

"Welcome, my sons. Welcome. I have expected you." His voice was reedy, and Peter shivered. The old man beckoned. "Woe unto all men shall be this day," he said. "Woe, for soon no more shall be any men upon all the Earth. . . ."

Peter felt Allen's hand upon his shoulder. "We need the food and clothing inside. Come on."

The old man watched them change. "I have seen in the woods things which no other man has seen," he said. "I have watched in fear, and in understanding, and I say to you that there shall be no more men on all the Earth."

Peter looked at him curiously. The sparkling eyes seemed bright with sanity; the features, though thin, were not repellant.

"I have wandered these woods many years," the old man stated, nodding. "Yet never have I seen before what I have seen this day. In the clearings and on the hilltops I have found things which no other man has ever found, and I am afraid."

Allen rose from burning their workers' clothing. His keen

eyes settled momentarily on the old man, then turned to Peter.

"We must go on. It's not safe to stay here."

"Nor safe anywhere, my son." The old man pointed one finger towards the heavens. "No longer is there safe place for man on this Earth. I have seen, and know. I am wise, and tell no lie."

"What have you seen?" Peter interjected.

"Trees. Spindle trees, that grow like smoke from seeds not of this Earth."

Allen touched his forehead significantly. "We're wasting time," he whispered.

Peter did not move. He felt the old man was sincere. The tone rang true.

"You—have made some mistake," he said.

The old man shook his head fiercely. "Should I come down out of the hills for no cause? Should I lie to you, when my lying would be useless? No, I say that I have seen these things, and have understood." He drew himself upright. "I have comprehended, and am afraid. Other men will see, and will be afraid, and my words shall be proven true. For I say that there shall be no men upon all this Earth. The cities built of his hand shall sink into the soil, and the things that he has made shall be no more. It shall be so——"

Peter shivered. All at once their escape seemed less important.

"You can—show us?" he breathed.

The old man inclined his head. "I can show you, my sons."

He drew his ragged coat closely round him, and stepped from the hut door. Peter thought Allen was going to argue, but he shrugged.

"If he's going up into the hills, that way's as good as any for us."

The old man looked back. "It is but a little way," he said.

They followed him through the wood, torches in their hands. Darkness hid the shadowy trees, and cool night air

came on their faces. Peter wondered what Judy was doing, and whether he would ever see her again.

"Soon, now, we shall be there," the old man said.

He strode ahead, following a path amid the trees. They ascended sloping ground, and emerged upon a clearing where mould and turf ran up to an outcrop of stone. The old man pointed. A tiny, thin plant, light green, grew upon a rock, almost like a tremulous wisp of smoke. It looked immeasurably fragile.

"What shall happen to Earth when strange things grow?" the old man murmured.

Peter frowned. The plant seemed to be little enough. He shone his torch round it, and upon the surrounding rocks. His brows rose, and he compressed his lips. Many similar plants had begun to grow in many places. Some were so tiny as to be scarcely visible. They grew on soil, stone and turf equally well.

"They are the first seedlings of the green twilights," the old man stated. "That is my belief. They have grown quickly, so quickly."

"But—they're very small," Allen breathed.

No one answered. Peter drew back. He felt that the plants were alien, unnatural to Earth, and repugnant. Who could say from what distant world they had come, and into what they would mature?

"We shall get caught, waiting here," he said.

He was glad to leave the clearing. A string of moving lights bobbed among the trees in the direction of the hut.

"We've already waited too long," Allen said thinly.

During the hours of the chase Peter wondered whether the chances of escape had indeed justified the attempt. Their absence had been noted, and undoubtedly reported without delay. Searchers came from the road, and down through the hills. Lights bobbed everywhere, and men's voices called to each other. The circle closed. Breathless, his clothing thick with mould, Peter heard the lines of men creeping nearer. Dawn made the sky grey. The two men's arms

which wound round him suddenly from behind could not be thrown off. . . .

The official consulted a card on his desk, then looked up. His gaze was keenly critical.

"You will be placed under constraint," he said. "We cannot allow the foolishness of individuals to threaten our stable society, or permit such insubordination. You have sacrificed your right to be considered as a free worker, and must be disciplined."

Peter was conscious of the two men on each side of him.

"I do not care for your glorious freedom," he said with heavy sarcasm. "People are individuals, not robots."

A faint tinge of pink came into the other's cheeks. "You must be taught to think otherwise!"

Peter stared back at him. "I should like to know my crime."

"That of wilfully abandoning essential work. Our national safety depends upon productivity. You are therefore guilty of a crime against the state."

The man gestured dismissal, and the two men stepped to Peter's side. This time the handcuffs were there, he thought with bitterness as they marched down the outside corridor. Technically, he was a prisoner of the state, guilty of minor sabotage.

The plane that was to return him to the city of his birth stood ready. Technically, he was still a member of that city, and it was there his toils would continue. He felt resentment and rebellion. He wondered whether nothing would ever happen to break the insidious regime.

Noon sun glinted on their wings. Patches of fleecy cloud dotted the sky, and the hum of the craft seemed almost as sleepy as a bee on a summer afternoon.

He looked below. A town passed under them, and his interest quickened. He leaned towards the cabin window, gazing intently down.

The roofs of the buildings had an odd, greenish tint. One or two of the smaller, little-used roads also seemed to suggest

the same hue. Abruptly he remembered the strange old man of the woods, and his words of warning. They had rang as in prophecy. "There shall be no more men on all the Earth." And in the clearing there had been the wispy spindle trees, bright green.

"Have there been any more green twilights?" he asked abruptly.

The guard in the seat beside him looked round. "Green twilights? No. Not last night. The night before there was a weak one. Why?"

*No more*, Peter thought. Whatever had been in the atmosphere had settled. . . .

"Oh, nothing," he said.

Now, even the fields and hills seemed to have a slightly unnatural hue, as if plants not of Earthly origin grew among the grasses there. The tint was there as far as his eye could see in every direction. There were other signs, too, which he had not noticed before. Men were busy with shovels and hoses in one thoroughfare; he could not see what they were trying to clear away. At another point many people had alighted from a vehicle, and were talking and gesticulating.

The plane climbed again, and the details were lost. Peter sat staring straight before him, his mind intensely active. A mirror was fitted to the partition ahead, and he was amazed at his own expression. His light blue eyes held a bright, expectant look. His cheeks seemed to have been drawn thin, and his lips were compressed.

*Seedlings of the green twilights*, he thought.

The plane droned on, at last descending. Below, the landing strip was bright green as a freshly-washed carpet. Men with flame-throwers were working near one hangar, but the hangar itself, and the concrete in front of it, had the same verdant tint.

The plane circled twice before landing. Its extended wheels struck with an oddly muffled sound, and it slowed quickly to a halt. The guard said something under his



breath, and Peter found himself pushed towards the opened door.

As he walked towards the exit gate, his feet dragged through spindly plants more than ankle high. Looking back, he saw that the plane's wheels had ploughed two lines through them. His guard said nothing as he hesitated, and Peter saw that the man's face was white.

"We seem due for a—change," Peter said.

They went on towards the gate, walking as through long grass.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE lathe spat fiery particles against the shield. With his eyes prickling under heavy goggles, Peter whirled the control wheels, and a brilliantly silver turning disappeared into the chute. Just as before, he thought—except that now a guard watched him. The metal calipers closed upon a new casting, with a fierce shriek the lip of the tool touched its whirling perimeter, and sparks rained fitfully, crackling. His hands showed the skill of long training as he adjusted the mechanisms, wondering when the end of his lengthened shift would come.

A second gang had been working for an hour when a hand tapped his shoulder. He stepped back, wiped his forehead, and fell into step beside the guard. They passed through a door marked "*A man's joy lies in working for the good of all*" and into a corridor. The door swung shut, muting the sound of machine tools and the thrum of shafting.

"I wish to go to the medical annex," Peter stated.

It was a right he supposed would not be denied him. The guard shrugged, following closely at his side. Peter felt tense, and hoped nothing of his excitement showed on his face as he pushed open the familiar door. A young woman he did not know was entering records in a book. She looked up.

"Yes?"

His eyes swept the room. Judy was not there, and the girl was *new*. . . .

"My injured hand hurts," he said.

It was half true. He wondered whether he dared ask what had happened to Judy, and decided not to. Probably the girl did not know. The question might be entered in the daily records.

"It's only a slight inflammation," she said, and got new bandages.

Peter felt bitterly disappointed. He had hoped to see Judy. No one else came in, and soon he found himself outside,

marching down the corridor at the guard's side. Judy could be near at hand, or many miles away, he thought.

The guard rode stolidly at his side on the northbound passenger vehicle. Peter scanned the others, and the people waiting on the narrow platforms, as they swept past. Nowhere was any sign of Judy.

At the entrance to his living quarters the guard halted, and he went in alone. There was no other entrance or exit. Here, Peter thought, he was as securely a captive as if behind prison bars.

Sam Ravenloe wrinkled up his lined features in an expression of disgust, and scratched the tousled mass of his grey hair.

"If you ask me, there's more happening than we know," he said.

Peter eyed him from his bunk, half sitting up with his arms behind his head. The naked bulb in the ceiling fitment revealed in full the concern on his friend's face. Ravenloe occupied the only chair. His hands were deep in his overall pockets and his shoulders hunched up so that his neck seemed to have shrunk. He made a sound expressing dissatisfaction.

"What's more, we should be the last to know of it, down here!" he stated. "If you ask me, we're fools!"

"It's not wise to say that, Sam." Peter shook his head. "Such remarks are apt to get repeated where they do most harm."

Ravenloe grunted. "But it's the truth! I help with unloading the stuff that comes down, and the drivers talk. The whole countryside's green with these things, they say. The towns and roads, too. What's more, they're tough." He removed a hand from his pocket again, and pointed at Peter. "If you ask me, things are going to happen!" he stated. He chuckled, drawing in his lips. "Good job too, in a way! A few changes wouldn't hurt anybody."

"They might be for the worse," Peter suggested.

Ravenloe chuckled drily. "Impossible!"

Peter did not feel so sure. He had been glad when Sam had come in, not feeling ready for sleep, but Ravenloe seemed in an odd humour of foreboding mixed with triumph.

"Serve 'em right to have a bit of trouble on their hands, if you ask me," he stated. "They always give the orders, and we always do what we're told." He chuckled again.

"Know anything else?" Peter asked curiously.

"Nothing much. A lot of the loads were late—the drivers couldn't get on well with this stuff on the roads." Ravenloe pulled at his long chin. "One chap said he knows a gang had been out to clear the stuff away, but hadn't had much success. Good job too, I said. Give the bosses less time to pick on us!"

Peter remembered what he had seen from the plane, and the growths he had walked through. He wondered how much of Sam's statement was truth, and how much rumour.

"It's truth—certain truth!" Ravenloe declared, seeming to notice the doubt on his face. "I'm telling you what they told me—and they ain't men to make up lies of this kind!"

"No, Sam, I don't believe they are," Peter said slowly.

He gazed at the ceiling, wondering whether he should repeat the predictions of the old man of the woods. Better not, he decided. That *was* mere fancy. . . . "No more men on all the Earth——"

"What?" Ravenloe said.

Peter had not realised he had spoken. "Nothing—just something I heard."

Sam Ravenloe got up. "It's time I went——"

Alone, Peter considered what he had learned. Down in the underground city, they heard little enough of happenings on the surface. He supposed that eventually a generation of workers would arise who had never seen open fields and cities. They would accept life in the underground catacombs as normal, never knowing that their ancestors had been free.

The door opened suddenly, revealing Sam Ravenloe. His face had a grey tint.

"There's no light in the main tunnel!" he said.

Peter started up. "No light!"

"Not a bulb on!"

A power breakdown, Peter thought. But why? Such a thing had never happened before. Never during his whole life had any of the main tunnels or corridors been in darkness.

They hurried along the hewn passage. His room light was unaffected, and so was the single bulb in the narrow passage. The main tunnel beyond was in darkness. The guard had gone, and Peter stood on the narrow foot side-way, straining his eyes into the blackness. A murmur reached his ears, like a thousand distant voices raised in panic and fear.

He felt Ravenloe grip his arm. "Suppose it's something they can't put right, Peter? Suppose we're left—like this. *All* the lights may go out. . . ."

"I—don't think it should be as bad as that, Sam."

Peter's throat contracted. He began to feel his way along, keeping his left hand extended against the tunnel wall. He heard Sam Ravenloe following him awkwardly. They reached an intersection, where the right-angle corner of the tunnel could be felt.

"Suppose the whole city's like this!" Terror was coming into Ravenloe's voice. "None of the lifts will be working, or the trolleys. How can we get out?"

Peter turned, but could not see Ravenloe's face in the darkness. "That can't have happened, Sam."

It could, he thought. The whole city could be blacked out—a blind city. No moon; no starlight. Ravenloe's terror began to communicate itself to his mind. He wanted to run, or beat down the enclosing rock walls with his fists. . . .

Footsteps came scuffing towards them, and someone bumped into him, halting with an intake of breath.

"There's no light this way," Peter said, forcing calm.

"It can't be a general breakdown!" It was a man's voice, quivering. "That's too terrible to think of!"

"There's a light in my room—or was when I left," Peter said.

"Oh." The man sounded relieved. "The rooms are wired on an independent circuit. They'll be all right still, unless—"

"Unless there's a breakdown there, too," Ravenloe said in the blackness. An edge of panic had come to his voice. "Suppose there is! Suppose we're all left down here like this, and nobody can do anything!"

They were silent. Peter looked back to where a dim glow illuminated the tunnel behind them, so faint he could not be sure whether it was indeed there, the reflection from some corridor where a light still burned, or whether his eyes were deceived. Patches of dim colour seemed to float in front of his eyes.

"There'll be panic," Ravenloe murmured hollowly.

Peter listened. From somewhere far ahead came a voice, muted and echoing distantly. He started forward again, keeping his hand on the tunnel wall. Groups stood at junctions, discovered only by the sound of their breathing, or by low voices. The darkness had struck everyone into silence, as if they listened for some sound of good news. At one corner a woman was crying, and there was a man's voice, very low, comforting her. Peter wondered who they were. He closed his eyes tightly, and opened them, hoping some glimmer of light would appear. But he could not distinguish that his lids had risen, so complete was the darkness.

The voice came from a lit corridor. Peter went down it to an open door, and saw a room whose luxury contrasted sharply with the bareness of his own. The voice issued from a loudspeaker.

"One of the boss's apartments," Sam Ravenloe said. "If you ask me he's gone out to see what's happening."

"Insofar as is known, the trouble is widespread," the reproducer stated. "Transport is being increasingly interrupted by the plants, and some difficulties arise in maintaining essential services."

A bulletin from above, Peter thought. They were listening to something no worker would ever have been permitted to hear.

"It is hoped that the disorganisation will be corrected,"

the voice continued, "and a means found to destroy the plants. Efforts in the latter direction have so far failed, though all possibilities are being considered."

Abruptly the ceiling light flickered, went out, then returned.

"The lights in the tunnel are on again!" Sam Ravenloe cried.

They hurried out. People stood gazing at each other, startled and pale. A big man, broad, and with a wide, round face hurried to the corridor mouth, confronting them. Peter recognised him, and saw that he himself was known. Bushy brows shot up, and the man's eyes passed to the open door.

"You have listened to the surface report!" he snapped.

Pointless to deny it, Peter decided. The voice was still coming along the corridor. He wondered what the supervisor would do. Suddenly it seemed less important.

"I've had trouble with you before, Wrey!" The authoritative voice was accusing. "I shall order your detention."

A retort sprang to Peter's lips. He suppressed it. Not yet had come the time to rebel openly, and to do so would be to seek confinement in a barred cell. He waited stiffly, face without expression, while guards were summoned. There was no escape through the tunnels of the city, and he must not become a fugitive while it was possible that Judy was nearby, and needed him.

In the next few long hours, a little information seeped through to Peter. Two of the guards who replaced those first set at his door seemed to bear him no ill-feeling, and told him all they knew. Supplies had been delayed; other breakdowns had arisen. Beneath their words Peter read a secret, personal terror. They feared another breakdown—one so general and long that the underground city would be reduced to chaos.

The hours drifted into days, and after one period of sleep Peter awoke to find that no breakfast had been provided for him.

"We're all on short ration, this morning," one of the guards said. "Food consignments have been delayed."

Peter sat on the edge of his bunk and watched the bulb above. He wondered what was happening on the surface. There was no clue. The surrounding rocky walls shut him off from the world.

The door was opened. "The supervisor wishes to see you."

He went out, a guard on each side. Their faces had a drawn, tired look as if they had not slept. The people they passed were subdued and avoided each other's eyes.

"The trolleys are suspended," the guard said.

They walked rapidly along the narrow footway hewn into the tunnels at a slightly raised level. Everywhere Peter saw evidence of growing uneasiness. The city seemed quiet, as if much of its machinery had been brought to a halt. Never had he known such silence. Before, the air had always throbbed with production, and the walls vibrated with the power of machine-tools.

They went down a corridor. Peter listened, and knew that the workshops in which he had laboured were silent. The quietness seemed strange, foreboding.

The supervisor sat behind his desk. Heavy lines grooved his face, and his hands were restless on the papers before him. He leaned back, looking up.

"By setting a bad example you have endangered our administration, Wrey."

Peter thought of the silent machines. "The old rule is finished," he declared.

The other frowned at him. "We must maintain order—shall indeed do so! I have brought you here to learn my decision, not to give you own opinions——"

"Nevertheless, you shall hear them!" Peter stepped to the desk and tapped it sharply. "We workers have done what you've told us long enough! I and ten thousand like me in this city are in danger through no fault of our own! Have you thought what a general breakdown would mean?"

A flush was on the round face. "I shall summon the guards!" He half rose from the chair.

Peter walked round the desk, his eyes burning and his lips



set. "Your rule is unjust. Like all unjust rule, it breaks down when a testing time comes. Listen." He raised a finger "Hear that silence? That means freedom for me and ten thousand like me!"

The other forced himself upright, glaring, fury in his eyes. "I shall record your remarks——"

Peter snorted. "It'll take more than reams of paper to maintain order when this city becomes a death-trap. Put *that* on your records! I've finished. Get it—finished. You can go to the devil."

He turned on his heel and strode to the door. The two men outside did not stop him. He reached a corner and turned down it, hearing a voice shouting after him.

The door of the medical annex swung open under his violent pressure. The new girl looked up, startled. Behind her was the matron.

"Where's Judy Kimble?" Peter demanded.

They appeared amazed into muteness. The girl looked terrified. Peter saw himself in the mirror doors of a cabinet, and half laughed. There was a wild expression on his face—but it was determination, not madness. . . .

"I asked a question," he stated.

The girl looked relieved; almost amused. She shook her head. The matron drew herself up, recovering her poise.

"She's not here."

"Why?"

"She has been transferred elsewhere."

Peter felt as if struck. "Elsewhere?"

"To another workers' city."

Another city, Peter thought. Another city, where there might be the same universal danger. . . .

"Where?" he snapped.

"I don't know."

He saw that the matron was speaking the truth. She would not know. It was not her business. He hesitated, then turned to the door. Judy was gone. Beyond that he could not for the moment think. It seemed to make his rebellion pointless; his determination to escape, without meaning. . . .

Peter stopped running, listened, and walked on rapidly. No pursuing voice called for him to halt, but he knew that he wasn't safe for long. No fugitive could hide in the city. He had heard of others who tried—and always failed. Somewhere in the lighted tunnels, unexpectedly, the hand of authority had always descended on them.

He decided it was unsafe to return to his room—watch would be kept, and he could never go back there. A main tunnel was ahead, and he emerged into it, walking quickly. Many people were on the sideways, hurrying about their business with intent faces. Strain was visible in their eyes and about their lips, and Peter guessed its import. They feared another breakdown in lighting; one that could not be corrected. . . .

He made for the bays where goods brought down from above were unloaded. Men stood there in groups, unoccupied. Few vehicles were present, and all were empty. Three workers in brown overalls were talking near a lorry, and paid no attention to his approach.

"The underground supply lines from the generating station will be all right," one said. "It's not that I'm worried about. They may not be able to keep the generators running. Tell me what will happen *then*."

No one answered. Peter drifted into the group. "What's happened?" he asked.

They looked at him, and the man indicated one of his companions. "Abe here says he doesn't believe they'll keep the power stations going. He's driven in from the south. Tell him, Abe."

The driver nodded. "I came down by the power station. The turbines will be blocked up—bound to be, I say! The dam's covered with these plants—the buildings are almost hidden. And they're floating in the water!" He placed a stubby finger dramatically on Peter's chest. "That's where the trouble's going to be! The flow of water will be stopped——"

"And that means darkness," the first man interjected.

Peter bit his lips. "They'll try to keep the sluices clear, and the turbines running," he pointed out.

The driver sat down on an empty crate. His energy seemed gone. "You haven't seen what it's like up there," he said flatly. "I have. They are trying—there are half a dozen gangs at work clearing the dam. But the water's full of plants." He sighed. "You don't know what a job I had getting here. Two hours' journey, by rights—and it took all day!" He paused. "What's more, I'd say that this load I brought down is the last—ever."

They looked at each other and Peter sensed their tension. Instinctively he gazed at the overhead lights. It could have been his imagination—or they could have been slightly reduced in brilliance.

"You've never seen anything like it," the driver said. "Some of the roads are cleared but they just can't keep them all free. Nor the towns, either. If the stuff didn't spread so quick, they might. But it's everywhere. And getting worse. Never seen anything like it in my life. Buildings and everything, all covered——"

Peter moved on, disquiet tautening his nerves. He went in the direction of the exits to the sloping tunnels which led to the surface, but the steel doors were locked. They had been designed to withstand bomb-blasts, and exclude gas or flood, and formed an impenetrable barrier. They had served, too, to prevent the escape of many a rebel who longed to flee from the city.

He thought it unsafe to remain. Searchers might expect him to come this way. He went back through the empty bays and into the centre of the city. He wondered whether he dared risk trying to find Sam Ravenloe, or whether Sam, too, would be watched. It seemed many hours since he had eaten. A single day's supply of food-tickets was in his pocket; when those were gone, no means of obtaining food would remain. He hesitated, went into a nearby cafeteria he recognised, and began to collect a meal from the counter. A man he did not recognise took his card.

"You not working?" He punched the corner.

"No." Peter took it back. "Some of the machines have been stopped."

He settled down in a corner with his back to the door. The man came out, wiping the long tables, all empty. He stopped, apparently wanting to talk.

"Know anything of what's going on?"

"No." Peter continued to eat rapidly. "Nothing much. I understand there's been a little trouble on the surface—plants, I believe."

"That's it!" The other sounded excited. "I've heard that, though they don't tell us anything down here. Plants, they say, everywhere!"

He paused dramatically, but Peter did not lift his eyes from his plate. He felt there was nothing to say. To repeat what he had heard would only waste time, and foster panic.

"Perhaps they'll get it all under control," he said.

The man sucked in his lips. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Have you thought what would happen to *us*? Think of it—tens of thousands of us down here, with no food and light. No air, either, if the ventilator fans stop. Black as pitch! It'd be worse'n hell! It'd be bedlam—the place would be a madhouse."

Peter felt his skin prickle. He ate the last crust and got up. Suddenly as if a switch had been turned, the lights flicked out. He turned towards the door, vividly conscious of a feeling of personal danger. Absolute blackness met his searching gaze; no reflected light came from the tunnel. He listened, and heard only his companion's heavy breathing. Complete, terrifying stillness had come. No machinery vibrated the air; and the ventilator fans had ceased to murmur!

A sound almost a whimper came from the man. Peter took a cautious step in the direction he thought the door lay, and came up against a table. He halted.

This was it, he thought. The final blackout, plunging the whole city into darkness frighteningly complete.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE silence had gone and the dark city murmured with many voices. Men swore, helpless, asking each other what had happened, and when light would return. They groped along tunnels and corridors, lost, searching for light and finding none.

Peter stood outside the door, his back to the rocky wall. In his mind was a plan of the surrounding area of the city, and the knowledge gave him confidence. He faced to his left and began to walk along the footway, one hand on the hewn rock, the other extended before him. He determined that no momentary panic should make him lose track of his position. Once that happened, he would be helpless.

He turned left. Ahead should run a long tunnel, with many intersecting roads, one of which led to the locked exit bays. That road should be the third. He frowned. Or was it the fourth? He would try the third, he decided. If that failed, he would retrace his steps and locate the next inter-section.

He moved cautiously, not hurrying. The sound of men shouting began abruptly, then ceased. Someone blundered by from the opposite direction, breathing heavily. Peter called to him, but he did not stop.

And this was only the beginning, Peter thought. He would not let his thoughts wander too far into the future.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, solid rock met his hand ahead. He stopped, fighting away the upsurge of panic. There should be no wall there, he thought. He should have come to the first intersection—a vacant space he would have to cross before continuing down the main tunnel.

He felt the wall ahead, and realised that he was in a narrow cul-de-sac. Breathing heavily, he turned about, staring into the utter darkness.

There had been a narrow alley-way branching off the

tunnel, he thought. Probably one vehicles never entered, and which he had never noticed. He began to return the way he had come, following the wall.

The way seemed interminable. Vacant space met his left hand, but it only seemed to be an open doorway. He should have counted his steps, he thought, and crossed slowly to the opposite wall, which he had followed originally. It was uninterrupted and he went on. Ahead was a murmur which might well come from the main tunnel.

The voices were louder, with an undertone of mounting panic. Someone was calling that everyone should remain where they were, but his order went unattended. The beginning of general disorder, Peter thought.

He emerged into the main tunnel. Voices were approaching, loud, and the sound of hurrying, stumbling feet. A group of men swept into him, swearing. He felt himself carried away from the wall, spinning. He struggled to free himself, and someone hit him in the chest. A man's voice, afraid, snarled something. He lost his balance, and landed on hands and knees in the roadway. The men went on, almost running, wild like men chased by a phantom.

There was a phantom, Peter thought as he got up unsteadily. Fear. The dread was beginning to grow. It would become terror.

A halted vehicle met his groping hands. He held to it, and swore. His sense of direction was gone. He could not be sure, now, which way he should go—and if he erred he would be returning into the heart of the dark city.

He found his way to the wall, and stood with his back pressed against the rock. Nothing suggested which wall of the tunnel he was near. An opening he discovered to be quite narrow was at his left . . . but that could mean nothing, he decided. It might not be the alley he had followed; could, instead, be the opposite cutting. If so, and he turned to his left, he would be going in the wrong direction.

Perspiration came to his brow, cold and quick, at the realisation that the one thing he had dreaded had arisen.

Murmuring voices filled the air and he stood listening,

his hastened breathing slowing to its normal speed. Men were arguing; amid their voices sounded a woman, near hysteria, disregarded as each strove to make himself heard.

"If you ask me, you're going the wrong way!" someone declared.

Peter's attention quickened. He went cautiously towards the voices. No one seemed to be listening to the others, and the voice he had heard was raised again, swearing.

"If you ask me, you're fools! The whole pack of you will get lost—and serve the lot of you right, too! You're fools, idiots! Think I don't know my way here? I've come this way often enough!"

Argument drowned the words. Peter felt someone ahead, and gripped a bony shoulder. Its owner swore, squirming.

"Leave me be! Go your own way if you want . . . !"

Peter shook him. "Sam Ravenloe!"

The struggling ceased. "Peter Wrey!"

Peter held Ravenloe's arm. "Let's get out of here—leave them, if they won't see sense!"

"Serve the lot right, too!" Ravenloe agreed. "Silly devils!"

They moved together along the wall. The sound of argument dropped away behind, and Peter halted.

"Which way, Sam?"

"Straight on, if my judgment's right."

"We'll chance it, Sam."

The exit bays were empty. Those who had been there were gone. Peter sat on a crate against which he had stumbled, gazing into darkness. So complete was the gloom that his eyes ached with straining to see. He supposed that many hours had passed since he had found Sam Ravenloe in the tunnel.

"We'll never break open the doors, Sam," he said.

"No." The voice came hollowly out of the blackness. "If you ask me, we're done for. Them doors were made to withstand anything!"

They were, Peter thought. And the darkness hindered any

possible attempt at forcing them. The city was in disorder; with the passing hours the sounds telling of terror and confusion had increased. He hated to picture the centre, most densely-populated areas.

"If only we could make a light," Sam Ravenloe murmured.

Peter grunted. They had talked that over several times. But the city had been electrically heated and lighted. No open, coal or oil-burning furnaces of any kind existed—they would have caused grave ventilation difficulties. No one smoked—that was considered wasteful and inconvenient and had been eliminated, though Peter had heard his father once speak of it. . . .

Peter sniffed, and wondered if some subconscious prompting had brought the subject into his mind. A faint odour of smoke hung in the air, tickling his nostrils and throat.

"Someone else seems to have had the same idea," he said, and his hands unconsciously tightened on the packing-case.

That there was smoke in the air became certain, and the fumes seemed those of burnt oil. Minutes passed, and Sam Ravenloe coughed.

"Somebody trying to suffocate the lot of us——" he growled.

Peter wondered what had happened. With the city's ventilation system inoperative, the danger at which Sam hinted could become very real. The oxygen in the tunnels would not be replaced.

Footsteps sounded on the concrete floor—a man who walked heavily, stumbling. He came up against some obstacle, muttering, and was still. Through the dark Peter could hear him panting. The smoke was worse, and the newcomer seemed unaware of their presence.

"We can't get out this way." Sam Ravenloe's voice came flatly.

The newcomer grunted, apparently surprised. "Who's there?"

"Do names matter, now?" Peter asked.

He thought the voice familiar; once it had held an authoritative note, but now its owner seemed less sure.



"I am Supervisor Weygand," the voice announced. "You are workers. I demand—order—that you obey and help me."

Ravenloe laughed and the sound echoed through the bay. "As easy as that, eh?" He coughed. "Any ideas?"

Weygand seemed to make a desperate attempt to maintain his authority. "It is the duty of every worker to do as he is instructed——"

"Times change!" Peter felt irritated. "If you've any means of helping us all, out with it. But if you've only come to try to order us about, you'd better think again!"

There was a long silence which grew. At last he heard the newcomer clear his throat.

"I will take up the matter of your insubordination later. Meanwhile, we must open the gates."

Peter disregarded the warning, feeling it empty, and that argument would waste time. "They're locked," he said. "As well try to open them as push down the rock."

Silence came again. Peter sensed that Weygand was shocked at this information, but that lingering habit, the result of a lifetime's training, made him strive to appear master of the situation.

"Very well, we must return to my rooms." The voice was clipped, but the undertone of fear not wholly concealed. "You will accompany me. It will be your duty to see that I am not molested——"

Sam Ravenloe interrupted him with a snort. "What is all this? If you ask me, it's a bit late for you to be giving orders!"

"Go on, supervisor," Peter said. The desire to save oneself was strong in any man, he thought. Weygand might have means denied to them.

"I have a duplicate key which can be used." The voice was directed towards him. "I was in this direction, and did not go back for it, assuming the doors would be open."

Peter got down from the case. Many hours had passed, but he felt invigorated. "We're with you," he said. "But take my advice—keep quiet. If your voice is recognised there may be men about who feel they've a debt to pay. . . ."

He knew it to be true, and felt an almost savage satisfaction. He himself had suffered at the big supervisor's hands, though those sufferings now seemed very trivial. To make a passage through the dark city would not be easy.

Peter wondered whether he would ever again live through such hours of waking nightmare. With arms linked tightly together they found their way laboriously through the city. Smoke was thick in the air, unseen, but tingling in their throats and lungs. The air was hot and stale; the darkness pressed closely around them, heightening the terror. No flames relieved the gloom, showing where the conflagration had been, but fumes as from something smouldering came always more thickly about them. Long before they reached Weygand's rooms Peter sensed that Sam Ravenloe was faltering.

"Once we can get the doors open there'll be fresh air, Sam," he urged.

Once they disputed which junction to take, and continued for almost an hour until they came among unfamiliar surroundings, and had to return. Peter experienced an agony of doubt, wondering if they were lost. If so, it was the end. . . .

He had no idea of how much time had passed when Weygand brought them to a halt, and they went in through a narrow corridor. He could hear the supervisor's laboured breathing; a drawer was opened; a grunt of dismay came, then a sound expressing satisfaction.

"I've got it!"

"Then don't lose it, for pity's sake!" Sam Ravenloe said, immeasurably tired.

They rested a few moments in the comparatively clear air and Peter grew conscious of sounds outside—of men swearing, half-crazed with anger, terror and misery.

"This is where he lived," a voice said. "They were responsible for all this!"

"They should have sent us all up soon as there was danger," another argued.

"Of course!" A man swore. "But they didn't bother!"

The voices came nearer, angry. "Like to get my hands on any of them!" And a laugh, terrible to hear. "Do you know we'll all die——?"

Footsteps came in the doorway. Peter caught Weygand's arm, and found him trembling.

"Silence, for your life, supervisor!" he hissed.

He felt Sam take his other arm, and swore roundly. "I'd like to find him!" he stated loudly. "Wonder where he is?"

"Gone—frightened to death, I bet!" Sam grated.

The men stopped at the door. Peter expelled an oath. "This is the supervisor's rooms, ain't it?" he demanded roughly. "Where is he? Just let me find him!"

There was argument, many voices coming together, and the sound of men entering the room. Peter edged towards the door.

"You looking for Supervisor Weygand?" someone asked.

"I am! I've got a grudge or two to pay off!" Peter elbowed someone out of the way. "You know where he is?"

Denials came, and a general movement towards the door. They were swept along the corridor, and into the main tunnel. Smoke caught their throats and they began to cough.

"Where are the bosses hiding?" someone demanded.

"The devil knows," Sam Ravenloe said in the darkness.

Peter pushed along the tunnel. They came out of the elbowing group and he felt relief. The men had been in no mood to hear reason . . . the key would have been lost. . . .

They sought their way painfully back along the tunnels, panting, now, and with eyes streaming. Peter decided that many hours must have passed. Sam Ravenloe lagged, and abruptly Peter found his arm released. Ravenloe coughed.

"I'm—done. Go on without me."

Peter halted. "We're in this together. We get out together—or not at all!"

There was silence. Peter quivered, biting his lips. If Sam chose to avoid them, they would never find him. . . .

"Don't be a fool, Sam," he said. "We've come through the worst of it."

He knew the words to be a lie. Near by was wheezy

breathing. He shot out an arm and caught an overall; its owner struggled, almost tearing the material from his fingers.

"Don't Peter, I'm an old man . . . !"

"And going off your head, if you think I'm going to leave you in this hell! Do I drag you?"

The reply was inarticulate. Gripping Sam with his free arm, Peter started forward again. His feet were lead. They stumbled, half holding each other up, coughing, and he wondered whether they would make it. Weygand seemed the strongest of them all, and at last drew them round a corner.

"The exit bays."

Peter felt he was in a dream, and could not believe his ears. Behind, in the city, things had grown strangely quiet.

"The doors slide," Weygand said. His voice was husky. "They unlock from a little office at the side. . . ."

Peter realised that he had gone.

Long minutes dragged by, and Peter sensed that Sam Ravenloe was in a bad way. His breathing sounded stertorously, and his customary ability to joke had failed.

The air seemed to be without oxygen. Perspiration beaded his face, and he felt that days had passed since he had last slept and eaten.

At last, after an apparent eternity, came the sound of steel rolling aside. Peter staggered up, starting towards it. No welcomed, cool, clear air fanned his cheeks; no light met his straining eyes. He heard Weygand swear, then laugh—a sound wild and nerve-wracking.

"Here's the door . . . !"

Peter stumbled through, caught his toe upon something trailing across the tunnel, and fell upon his knees. He reached forwards, exploring with his hands.

Stems and roots blocked the tunnel. Twined together, they everywhere met his groping fingers. Their surface had a cool, rubbery texture, slightly resilient. He crawled along, and found that they extended completely to each side of the tunnel, where they clung to the walls to a height greater than he could reach.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE underground city lay still and silent as the rock from which it was hewn. No voices echoed along the network of tunnels, no vehicles moved there, nor did a single light glow in the smoky darkness. Soundless as an unpeopled city, as vast thicknesses of stone, clay and soil cut off its intersecting ways from the sky and air.

Above, the sun shone in a slightly clouded sky. Green-grey, sparkling, masses of vegetation glowed in the bright warmth. Fronds swayed in the moving air, lush and flourishing. Roots burrowed rapidly into the unresisting soil, their awakening strength turning up ridges and hillocks. Rubbery boughs sprouted more abundantly as the days passed, thrusting up new stems towards the sunshine.

Below, in the shadows under the quickly spreading leaves, rootstems moved as if something strove to free itself from a yet lower level. The disturbance ceased for a long time, then began again. Hands appeared, thrusting aside the tendrils, and a man heaved himself through as if ascending from a subterranean burrow. White-faced, his sandy hair tangled, he stared round, then sank to his knees, helping someone up from below. His brown overall was stained and torn, his shoulders drooping with fatigue. A small man emerged, screwing up his face and scratching his grey head.

"If you ask me, we're not out of trouble yet," Sam Ravenloe said.

Peter looked around him. The fronds above their heads were so interlaced that only a dim twilight filtered through.

Forcing a passage up through the sloping exit tunnel had seemed almost impossible. But fresh air had percolated down through the mass of stem and roots which had penetrated so far in so short a time, and, at last, a dim glimmer of daylight had showed ahead. Sometimes he had felt their task beyond

human power. A day and a night had passed, and freedom been gained only when hope was beginning to fail.

They rested in the dim twilight. Weygand said nothing, but Peter saw his eyes stray towards the hole through which they had come, and knew his thoughts. It was too late to help those below.

Too late, Peter thought. He closed his eyes, planning what they should do. A way might be cleared down to the city, where there was food and shelter. Then, and only then, could they look around them and discover what had happened to the surface world of towns and people.

"We must take care not to lose trace of the entrance," he said slowly. "If we do, we shall never find it again."

He looked above him at the overhanging vegetation. The dimness had increased, suggesting that night was already near. He wondered about the plants that surrounded them, and where they had come from. No one knew what they would eventually grow into, or how long their stay upon the Earth would last. They had thrived amazingly, as if finding ideal conditions in the abundance of soil, air and light. Eerie and quiet, they stood on all sides, extending in groves farther than the eye could reach.

He slept at last, not dreaming, inert with fatigue. The nightmare was momentarily forgotten as brain, nerves and body found needed rest.

They brought provisions from below, and a metal bar which they set up by the tunnel entrance to indicate its position. And there they waited. Peter had tried to keep track of time and now judged that two weeks must have passed since the lights flicked out for the last time.

"It wasn't our fault," Weygand said once. "The authorities were surprised—overwhelmed——"

It could have been so, Peter admitted, as he surveyed the plants surrounding them. Transport would have been halted, communications broken, and men suddenly rendered impotent to help their suffering fellows below. Recrimination could benefit no one.

They decided to move south towards the hills. In many places the highway that had stretched from the tunnel could be discovered, though roots were reaching across it from both sides. It was almost like walking through a cave, Peter thought. Silvery, grey-green trunks now stretched upwards on every hand, spreading overhead into tangled fronds which hid the sky. Soon they reached a house, quite empty, with its roof lost to sight amid the vegetation.

"Might be a view from an upper window," Sam Ravenloe suggested.

They went in, but the upper windows only looked out into the heart of the overhead thicket. A trapdoor gave access to the roof, and Peter climbed out upon it.

A shimmering mass of vegetation extended as far as he could see. Thin shoots moved in the wind, and to the south was a rise which prevented an extended view in that direction. Never since prehistoric times had there been such plants on the Earth, he thought, amazed. Now once again was an abundance of such vegetation as had existed when the great coal-beds of the planet had been laid down. He might have imagined himself plunged back millions of years into pre-history, but for one thing—the plants were alien. . . .

They descended and went on. Peter's pack seemed to grow more heavy as he struggled hour after hour over the sinuous roots, thick as a man's arm and running along the surface. They mounted rising ground, and eventually came to a ridge which gave a view ahead. To his right the tops of the plants stretched like a grey-green sea to the horizon. A mile away there emerged through it the roofs of a town. Its streets were blocked, its buildings half submerged in the tide of vegetation. The dim evening light made the scene strange and frightening, and Peter shivered.

Away to his left, against the outskirts of the city, was a small clearing, made by an extremity of human effort at which he could not guess. Campfires twinkled in it, few, bright red sparks in the blue gloom.

"There are other people left," Sam Ravenloe whispered.

Peter sensed his excitement. The distance was too great

for the unaided eye, but the fires must mean there were people. Yellow tongues of flame rose from them, illuminating the adjacent buildings, and shining on the vertical wall of vegetation at the clearing's edge. The tops of the plants spread like giant ferns, each interlacing with its neighbours. Behind the precipice of alien growth, away to his right, the sun was outlined as a dull red orb. The patchy cloud above was ruby tinted, fading away to purple and black in the east. The whole made a scene so strange, so terrifying, that Peter felt his limbs grow cold.

"We'd better camp here until morning," he said.

They settled down in a space among the slender trunks, but Peter found that sleep did not come easily. How little they knew about the alien plants, he thought. How very little. When at last he slept, it was for a short time only. He started upright, sure that he had heard an unexpected sound—an abrupt, high-pitched chirping, momentarily echoing, then gone. If it had been so, the sound did not come again. He wondered if it had been some trick of his half-waking brain, and sat listening. The silence was complete. Even the light wind had gone, and the fronds around them hung motionless.

A restlessness came upon him and he moved away among the alien trees, wondering what had happened to Judy, and whether he would ever see her again. He remembered how he had last seen her . . . how they had seldom been able to meet for more than a few minutes. . . .

Moonlight shone on the masses of silvery-grey below; the sky was clear and starlit. Away along the ridge, just visible, something moved. Peter stood watching, immediately still and tensed. The figure came more clearly into view—a child, creeping among the trunks, his face showing as a dim white oval.

Peter moved forward, beckoning. The child hesitated, drawing back, and slipped from view.

"Don't be afraid——" Peter called.

No reply came. Frowning, he started in the direction the little boy had gone, and glimpsed him again. He was try-



ing to run, but stumbling, and almost fell as he fled down the slope.

"We'll help you," Peter called.

Thoughts of the boy, so tiny and helpless, hiding in terror in the strange forest, dismayed him. He hurried on, listening to the sounds which showed where the other went. After a time silence returned, and he halted.

The trunks stood closely around him, almost hiding the moon. He leaned against one, breathing heavily, and slowly grew conscious of a faint sound, so indistinct that it seemed half imagined. It came from above, a thin, weak scratching.

High up the plant, just visible in the shadow, was a bulbous swelling. He frowned, staring up at it. He had seen nothing like this before, and the sound seemed to come from it. He stepped upon a protruding root, straining upwards, but failed to reach the level of the rounded growth. The scratching ceased, leaving utter silence.

It was odd, he thought, and shivered involuntarily. Memory of the chirping that had awakened him returned.

A rustling sounded on his right, and he looked round. A small white face was peering at him. Peter did not move, but smiled, hoping the lad could see.

"I'm a friend," he said.

The boy came nearer, peering at him, and abruptly began to cry. Peter approached him slowly, and he did not run. Instead, he squatted down among the roots, wailing. Peter picked him up, and the tiny arms clung tightly round his neck.

"They—drove me away," he wept.

"Who?" Peter started back up the slope.

"The men down by the fires. They said there's no food."

So people, driven by desperate need, had already turned against their fellows, Peter thought. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll look after you."

The lad seemed perhaps seven or eight, but small for his age. At last Peter set him down by their camp.

"What's your name, son?"

"I-Ivan."

He had stopped crying and Peter patted his shoulder. "What brings you out alone like this, Ivan?"

"I was—lost. I came out from the town with uncle, but he went back to get food. I waited a long time, then the men drove me away. That was—days ago."

"Then you're hungry?"

A vigorous nod answered his question, and Peter opened some of the biscuits which they had brought. The lad ate ravenously, watching them with dark, serious eyes.

Sam Ravenloe sat up, speaking for the first time. "Are there many men down by the fires?"

"Lots. They're dangerous. You'd best keep away." The boy glanced behind him. "They'd steal your food if they knew you had it."

"I see," Peter said. He put one of their blankets round the boy. "Seen anyone else, Ivan?"

"Not many. They've been fighting in the towns. Uncle said best to keep away. We didn't want to stay there. He said we should have to begin again, and that the towns were finished."

They were silent. Ravenloe lay down and sighed heavily. Ivan's hunger seemed momentarily satisfied.

"There was a lady who helped me," he said suddenly. "That was when I was up in the hills. I went that way to see if I could get into the town, to find uncle. But it was no good."

Peter felt his interest stir. "Who was she?"

"She didn't say." Ivan began to settle himself down in the blanket. "She didn't want to come to the town, so I slipped away, wanting to find uncle."

"You don't know her name?" Peter felt a lot depended on the answer. It was silly to hope . . . but he did—always must. . . . "What was she like?"

"I—I didn't notice, much. It was dark. She didn't say her name."

Peter quelled his disappointment, knowing he should have expected it. "Was she tall?"

"No—no, I don't think so. . . ."

They settled down to sleep. Peter wondered whether Ivan would remember more when dawn came, and he had rested. He listened, too, unconsciously expecting the eerie chirping that had come clear and sharp through the alien trees. It was not repeated. The early moon slowly dropped lower in the night sky and the shadows grew thicker.

Peter thought uneasily of the bulbous object which he had found. Who could say from where the alien plants had come, or the manner of their seeding? He had made a great mistake, he realised. He had thought of them as if they were plants of the Earth, though strange. But they were not of Earth, and no parallel could be drawn.

He looked around him in the dark, wondering whether the silence was reassuring—or concealed some threat of a kind he could not imagine.

## CHAPTER SIX

WITH dawn they started off down the slope. Often impassable clumps of alien growth had to be skirted, and they walked in a grey-green twilight, rarely glimpsing the sky. Progress was slow, and it was almost noon when they saw the clearing where the camp fires had burned. Ivan hesitated, and Peter stopped with a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't think it safe to go on, son?"

The boy's head shook vigorously. "No."

Weygand halted beside them, frowning, his heavy brows drawn down. "We must go into the camp and make our presence known," he stated.

Peter did not move. "I think not. They may resent outsiders, and be dangerous. I think we should circle round towards the hills."

The supervisor made an explosive sound. "I have not asked you what you think! I have given an order, and expect it to be fulfilled!"

Peter turned round and met his eyes levelly. "Things have changed—and also positions of authority. I do not feel it wise to agree with your suggestion——"

"Agree!" Weygand snorted. "You'll do as you're told——"

"Not necessarily."

Peter lifted his pack from where he had rested it and went on. He heard Sam Ravenloe talking with the boy as they followed and did not look back until they had almost reached a point level with the end of the clearing. Weygand was some distance behind, coming after them, but his face was ominous.

"Hope he don't cause trouble," Ravenloe murmured. "If you ask me, he's the kind who takes a long time to change his ways."

Ivan was looking ahead. "It was along this way that uncle left me," he said eagerly.

"Then we'll go on," Peter agreed. He hesitated. "Do you remember anything more about the girl who helped you? Was that farther on?"

Ivan nodded. "Oh, yes." He felt in the pockets of his flimsy coat, already badly soiled and torn. "She tied up my wrist with this. I'd slipped and cut it."

He pulled out a stained square of gauzy material, and Peter took it, his interest quickening. It was a handkerchief. He did not know whether it was Judy's; he did not recognise it. But in the corner, in blue, was worked a "J". Sam Ravenloe had watched them.

"There could be lots of people with that initial, Peter."

"I know, Sam."

Peter knew he was being warned to guard against hoping too much, when perhaps no cause for hope existed.

They were a little way from the farthest limits of the half-hidden streets and buildings when a man's voice, calling, sounded far ahead. Ivan stopped; joy lit his face.

"It's uncle!"

He sprang away through the alien trees, light and quick. They followed, and Peter emerged into one of the rare clear spaces to find an elderly man standing with his arms tightly round Ivan's shoulders. He was not tall and looked fragile. Hatless, his hair—thin, though golden as the boy's—was swept straight back. His face was mild, soft in its contours like a woman's. He turned to them and his eyes expressed gratitude.

"Thanks for looking after the boy."

The voice was quiet and that of a well educated man. Peter's first impression was not belied. The man told how he had returned to search for the boy and had not gone far away feeling he might return. He introduced himself as Richard Symes, said he had held a position in the City College of Science, and confessed that he had seen no young woman in any way answering to the description Peter gave.

"The College is intact," he said, "except for one wing,

where these things rooted on an upper arch and have brought down part of the roof." He gestured at the surrounding plants. "They're strange, you know, and their growing processes are by no means similar to those of Earth vegetation. We found that out in the early weeks, though we could do nothing."

"How long has it been?" Peter asked.

"Since they first appeared? Over three weeks, I make it. They grow fast, though not exceptionally so, compared with some of our more thriving species—as, for example, the larger funguses. They seem to be a somewhat parallel type, but much larger. The spores, which are supposed to have floated out of space, may have come from some planet many times the bulk of Earth." He paused, smiling very slightly with an apologetic air. "Sorry. You'll not want a lecture. . . . But they naturally interest me. Apart from what I have mentioned, they may have other—differences."

Peter noted the odd tone that had come into Richard Symes's voice. "Such as——?" he prompted.

"Oh, it's difficult to say."

He was silent, as if reluctant to speak. Peter recalled the bulbous swelling he had seen and a new unease crept slowly into his mind.

"You mean they may have characteristics that we don't normally see in plants?" he said.

Symes gave him a keen glance; the mild eyes held a curious expression.

"In brief, yes. Even our native plants vary a lot in size, shape, method of propagation, and other ways. There are suggestions—suggestions only, mind—that these alien plants may be one partner in the pair making up a—a *symbiosis*."

Peter felt that every word, spoken with such reluctance, underlined and emphasised his own fears. "What type of organism do you suppose would complete the pair, if there is a symbiosis?" he asked thinly.

"It is not possible to say."

No, Peter thought, it was not possible to say. The alien trees were of unknown origin. No one could predict the lines

along which they had developed, or in what manner their cycle of growth would be completed.

They camped that night on the slope of the hills, and Richard Symes told them how curiosity had changed to panic, and panic developed into chaos. Nations had been taken unawares, and their elaborately balanced civilisations shattered. Roads were covered and cities paralysed by the grey-green tide. It had happened almost before anyone realised how serious the threat was. He told them, too, of the empty College of Science, and that he hoped some time to return there to continue his work.

Peter thought of what he had been told as he lay gazing up at a single star that showed between overhanging fronds. Richard Symes had a keen intellect and no lack of determination, despite his mild exterior. That he had expressed himself so forcefully proved how strongly he felt their situation.

The star went from view. A light breeze stirred among the alien trees, and on it came a thin, high-pitched sound like the chirp of a cricket. Peter sat up, listening. The sound went on, a quick, short sharp chirruping. It might have been a bird—but the sound did not fit . . . rather it resembled a grasshopper's call. . . . No, Peter thought, not even that. Instead, it was a strange sound, which he could ascribe to nothing which he knew.

After a little while the chirping ceased, leaving unbroken silence. Moments dragged by, then Peter heard a rustling at his side. Sam Ravenloe propped himself up on an elbow.

"What was that . . . ?"

"I'd give a lot to know, Sam."

"I don't like it," Ravenloe said at last. "I've never heard anything like it in my life, and doubt if any man has. There's something queer going on."

They did not go to sleep, but sat looking into the darkness for a long time, listening.

It was nearly noon when they reached the hills. On every hand, as far as the eye could see, the grey-green tops of

the alien trees extended. Peter wondered what he had hoped to find. Perhaps a glimpse of cleared earth, proving that people had attacked the universal growth with success? There was none. Perhaps an indication that Judy had passed this way? If she had, no sign of her passing remained, he reluctantly admitted.

"It would be best for you to return to the tunnel," Symes suggested after he had scanned the surrounding area slowly. "It provides shelter—and some measure of protection."

Weygand had followed them, keeping a little apart. He looked at Symes quickly. "Protection? From what?"

"I—don't know."

The supervisor made a sound expressing contempt. "I can look after myself! I am not quite unarmed." He took one hand from a pocket. It held a black pistol. Peter had heard that those in authority had carried them, but the fact had not been too generally known. "If there's trouble, I shall not hesitate to use it!" Weygand stated.

Richard Symes fixed bleak eyes on him. "There may be a kind of trouble *that* won't settle, supervisor."

They began to descend the hilly slopes. Peter was amazed at the ease with which the plants had established themselves. No spot was so rocky that the long roots could not span it, and no place on all the hills was clear.

"It's difficult to see how men can ever make this planet their own again," Richard Symes said as they laboriously made their way along in the gloom. He indicated the extending boughs of the alien trees, meeting overhead. "It's beyond our power to get rid of these, and while they dominate the Earth we're finished."

Peter agreed. Civilisation had been halted abruptly—and the things upon which that civilisation had been built would also be destroyed, slowly, yet nevertheless surely. Crops would be killed, waterways blocked. Even the mightiest trees of terrestrial origin would be swamped in the alien tide. One day, he thought, there would be no creature or plant of Earthly ancestry on the planet.

In single file they continued towards the city whose out-



skirts they had passed. In many places the forest was quite impenetrable, and from time to time Peter saw bulbous swellings like that he had first noticed. They usually seemed to arise in the centre of a dense thicket, and he drew Symes's attention to several as they passed them.

Symes did not answer for a long time. "I've no data to go on," he said at last. "They may be to store moisture, or be a kind of seed-pod. Again, they may be something which has no parallel in terrestrial plants."

"You believe that, don't you?" Peter said quietly. He sensed it in Symes's tone, and the long silence before he had spoken.

"Perhaps. Who can say? But it is unscientific to jump to conclusions without proof."

They dropped a little way behind the others. "I thought I heard a scratching from one," Peter stated quietly.

Symes gave him a quick look. "Perhaps. . . . But there is no parallel in any terrestrial plant, though certain similarities, in some marine forms——"

"Similarities with what?" Peter demanded.

Symes did not answer. They passed a sloping trunk where one of the elongated globular shapes, large as a man, grew like a great bud in a fork, and Symes compressed his lips. His face twitched.

"I want to get back to the City College of Science," he said determinedly. "Limited facilities for a certain amount of work still exist. I'd be alone, but there is apparatus—there are things I'd like to check."

Night came, and they camped amid the rubbery trunks. Tired, Peter slept more soundly than for several weeks, but once, when he awoke, he saw that Richard Symes was sitting upright, listening. Dawn came at last, but Symes did not mention what he had heard. His eyes seemed to have sunken, his face to have aged.

"There are terrible things in the cosmos," he said as they broke camp. "Have you ever considered how tiny our Earth is, or how minute the whole solar system, compared

with the immensities of space, and the uncountable worlds beyond?"

Peter looked at him levelly. "You heard something in the night?"

"Perhaps. The plants deaden sound. It was difficult to be sure."

The sun was high in a clear sky when the first buildings came into view, and Peter thought that they seemed to have sunken a little more deeply into the surrounding vegetation. The camp was silent, the fires cold grey ash, and Peter gazed out into the clearing with a sudden, shocked feeling of dismay.

They walked across the empty space. The people who had been there appeared to have flown, leaving their possessions where they lay. Packages of food stood unused; bundles of clothing littered the ground about the dead cinders of the fires.

"All gone," Peter said, "but why?"

There seemed to be no answer. He scanned the buildings and fringe of the trees. No one was visible.

"If you ask me, it looks just as if they were afraid, and ran," Sam Ravenloe decided.

They searched the camp for some clue to suggest an explanation, but found none.

"I'm going back to the College," Richard Symes stated abruptly. "I think I can find my way that far."

They went into the edge of the town. A spore seemed to have settled on every available spot. Some had begun growing on roofs and in gutterings, and long roots trailed down to the ground. Walls had given way under the weight, and the very roadway itself was broken and heaved up by the strength of the growing plants.

"They say even mushrooms can lift and break a stone pavement," Symes murmured.

He led the way through streets which were almost impassable. Shop-fronts had collapsed; vehicles were hidden, or tipped over by the power of the coiled roots growing below

them. Open doors revealed that the interiors of the buildings were filled with masses of vegetation.

A few years, Peter thought, and the whole city will be a mere heap of rubble.

They passed a square where the plants had almost completely covered a cracked fountain, whose pedestal had been heaved bodily to one side, and came into a narrow alley between high buildings. Ahead was the back of a tall pile built of new red brick, with high windows and many-gabled, blue slated roof.

"The College of Science," Symes said, indicating it. "I feel that my scientific work is now vitally important."

Peter followed him. "You expect to find out something about the plants?"

Symes shook his head. "Expect is too definite a word. Hope, let us say . . . though I am doubtful."

"Even if he does, it won't help us," Sam Ravenloe decided, following.

Peter felt he had to agree. The catastrophe that had fallen upon the Earth was too extensive for mere men to combat.

They went in through a back door. Empty rooms echoed to their feet. One corner of the building was severely cracked and roots projected through a jagged hole. Hours had passed during their laborious passage through the city, and Richard Symes looked out at the shadowy sky.

"You'd better camp here the night," he decided.

Peter awoke knowing that a repetition of the shrill chirping he had heard had aroused him. The windows were dim grey oblongs in the dark, and heavy breathing told that his companions slept on. He rose quietly and went to a window.

It looked out upon what had once been a quadrangle. Shadowy trees stood near, just visible; from beyond them, still in the distance, came the continuous chirruping that had startled him from sleep. He listened, striving to analyse it. Not like a bird, or any creature he knew, it was mysterious

and chilling. Thin, fluting, wavering up and down, it went on and on, slowly growing louder.

"It's coming this way."

Peter started to Sam Ravenloe's hand on his shoulder, and the tense whisper in his ear.

"Seems like it, Sam," he murmured.

Listening, he decided that there were now many chirrupings, as if answering each other. It was not so difficult to imagine why the camp was empty, now, he thought. Only one question remained—were the people who had been there still alive . . . ?

A shape moved on the fringe of the trees, and Peter tried to distinguish it. It was, he thought, like a heavy sack, only half full, and tied at the mouth, so that its outline faded away to a thin point at the top. It appeared to be supporting itself half way up the trunks, by some means unknown, an enormous, dim, tear-drop shape, such as he had never seen before. It hung quite still, then began to move along the fringe of the alien trees. Its lower end rose, and the tapering point streamed behind like a fantastic tail. It went from view, moving rapidly, and the twittering started up again.

Peter mopped his face and found it damp. Sam Ravenloe cleared his throat.

"I—I don't like it, Peter."

"Nor I, Sam."

They waited, but nothing happened. "If we get out of this we should go back to the tunnel," Peter added at length. "It should be possible to protect ourselves, there."

He wondered what the dark, rounded object was, and how many of its fellows existed. He wondered, too, what had happened at the camp, and what would happen to anyone alone in the forest of alien growth—alone, perhaps, as Judy was. . . .

"Symes will never come with us," Ravenloe decided.

"Then we'll go alone, Sam! It's not safe here. If we live to morning, we go at dawn!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY came through the trees and to the metal bar set upright in the ground. A steady wind rustled the vegetation, surrounding them with a continuous whispering. Peter hoped that Symes and Ivan would be safe. Symes had been determined to stay behind, and the boy had refused to leave him. The shape had not been seen on the edge of the trees again, but a distant chirruping had continued almost until dawn.

Forcing a way through the congested city had proved painfully slow, and the march under the cave-like vault of the forest had occupied the remaining hours of daylight.

Sam Ravenloe pointed. "We didn't leave it like that!"

A large hole marked the tunnel exit; the roots were pushed aside, leaving a burrow into which a man could descend. Peter frowned. He wondered whether other people had survived in the depths of the city. It seemed unlikely. The circulation of fresh air had ceased, and the smouldering fire which they had never found must have consumed most of the remaining oxygen.

They descended, Weygand following, and Peter wondered if something had arisen to interrupt his plan. He felt that the underground tunnels should offer a safe camp, from which he could try to locate any survivors.

The way down was not difficult to follow, and the air in the loading bays had cleared, though the smell of smoke still lingered unpleasantly.

"We can make an oil-burning lamp," Peter decided. Only a dim light, almost gone, filtered down the tunnel. "Any food we find can be stored here, and we can close the doors if need arises."

He vividly remembered the panic of suffocation in which

they had last sought the exit bays. Wicks of cloth inserted in tins of diesel oil provided a yellow, smoky light, and Peter's impatience began to return. Weygand watched him prepare an improvised haversack of food, and his expression grew heavy. Peter sensed that there would be trouble, eventually—bad trouble.

"You're going out again, Wrey?" Weygand asked at last. Peter began to tie the pack. "Yes."

"Why?"

The voice held a note Peter did not like. "Briefly—to see if there are any survivors," he said thinly.

Weygand got up from where he had been sitting, and put his thumbs into his belt. "I do not consider we should split up," he stated.

Peter completed his task. "I think differently—for reasons I am not prepared to discuss. You can stay here. By going out I endanger no one but myself."

"You endanger us all," Weygand objected. He gestured. "If we are attacked we should all be together. . . ."

Peter looked at him. The element of fear and panic had not been wholly hidden. Weygand was a big man, but, until now, had always been backed by authority. He moved uneasily under the scrutiny.

"It's our duty to stick together for our own good, Wrey," he said.

Peter thought there could be other duties, too. "You're armed, why worry?" he pointed out.

He felt irritated. The supervisor's motives were selfish, prompted by fear for himself. Now, his face was furious.

"I order you to stay, Wrey!"

Peter laughed shortly. "You don't order, these days, supervisor. We do what we think best!"

"You are jeopardising us all by your irresponsibility! If you won't be guided by me, as I command, at least be guided by common sense——"

"The common sense of funk," Peter said. "To hell with it, and you."

He swung the pack upon his shoulders . . . and paused,

turning quickly, as running footsteps echoed from the direction of the deeper tunnels and chambers.

Ravenlœ halted, breathing heavily, his lined face grey. "They're—in—there, Peter——"

"What?"

"Things like we saw outside the College——"

Weygand faced the gloomy doorway, his gun in a hand that shook. "That explains the cleared exit."

Peter went slowly to the dark tunnel, one of the flickering lamps in his hand. Stale smoke hazed the stagnant air. The yellow flame barely illuminated the walls, making a weak circle of radiance. Within the space of a score of paces he seemed cut off from the world of light and freedom. The hewn rock walls were dark and strangely chill.

From ahead came faint, indefinite sounds, seeming to recede as he advanced. He might search the countless ways of the city for ever, and find nothing, he thought. Or might turn to find that his retreat was barred. . . .

He halted, listening. Silence had come back. He wished that there was some way to flood the intersecting tunnels with light, but he had none. The shadows danced and wavered ahead, and slowly he saw that some of the ghostly shapes were not caused by his flickering light. They moved independently, gathering slowly together and moving nearer. He strove to distinguish their outlines, but could not. They were formless, shadowy sacks tied at the top and dark as the blackness against which they moved.

The icy fingers of a dread such as he had never before experienced settled on his limbs.

He began to retreat, feeling his way backwards, not daring to turn. The tear-drop shadows followed, moving by some means which he could not discern. Abruptly a mass of glowing oily waste shot past him, sending up a plume of flame and smoke.

"Run!" Sam Ravenlœ's voice called.

Peter turned on his heels and leapt for the exit bays. From the door he looked back. The flames had subsided, and the shadowy forms were advancing again. Weygand swore,

and his weapon echoed thunderously, spitting bullets down the tunnel. None of the pendulous shapes moved. Motionless, except for a slight motion from side to side they hung almost as if suspended from the roof, hardly visible against the darkness.

Peter's nerves tingled as there came the sound of wheels rolling on steel, and a thin metal door came on rails across the tunnel mouth, separating them from the unearthly shapes.

Ravenloe came from a niche beside the sliding door. Peter remembered that such doors existed at one or two points throughout the city, and this one had been intended to prevent any conflagration in the unloading bays penetrating into the city itself. Ravenloe mopped his forehead.

"This means we can't go on into the lower tunnels," he said. "As long as we keep *them* penned up in there, we also keep ourselves out."

Peter thought of all the stores and equipment which they could now never reach.

"Thanks, Sam."

Ravenloe grimaced. "If you ask me, things look awkward." He shuddered. "Did you see them?"

"Not clearly," Peter said.

"Just as well! I don't want to—what I've seen already is enough."

Ravenloe mopped his face, his colour beginning to grow more normal.

"I hit them, but it made no difference," Weygand said hoarsely. "I couldn't miss, at that distance."

Peter's gaze turned upon him. The supervisor was clearly shaken. A spark of terror still showed in his eyes, and his hands shook as he filled the pistol. He put it away hesitantly, looking at the thin steel door.

"Where could such—things come from? I've never seen anything like it on Earth. Nor has any man! They're *weird*."

"Symes seemed to have a fairly good idea of how they arose," Peter pointed out slowly. "I can guess what he had in mind. If it's true, then we should not expect them to be



in any way like forms of life we know. They are alien to this planet—have originated in a part of the universe where life-forms are doubtless absolutely different from any we know. Briefly, he suspects they are symbiotic with the plants—cases almost parallel arise in some of our own species."

They listened, and he wondered whether the thin doors, intended for no such purpose, would be a sufficient barrier against possible attack.

"I'm going out as soon as it's light," he stated abruptly. The danger was growing, he thought. It was no longer the mere dangers of starvation and a general breakdown in civilisation. Added to that, now, was the active threat of the things that had appeared on Earth, some of which were behind the locked door. He regretted every moment that he had not spent in searching for Judy. \*

Sam Ravenloe nodded slowly in understanding; Weygand did not speak, or look at them.

Sun shone in dappled patches through the trees, seeming very bright after the shadowy gloom of the miles behind. Often listening, Peter went on. Ahead, the rubbery trunks were slightly less frequent, and a slope ran up to an out-cropping of rock. He hoped that Sam would be safe back in the unloading bay, and that the rest there would enable him to recover some of his vigour. The lined face had been grey, the kindly eyes tired; noticing them, Peter had urged that he preferred to go out alone.

A breeze, warm with sunshine, came down among the shaded boles and Peter sniffed. Once before he had seemed to catch a strange odour, and now it was stronger. It was sweet, like plants in bloom, but he could not place it.

He rested, then went on, ascending towards the rocky out-cropping. Slowly a view of the valley below began to spread out behind him, more and more clearly visible as he climbed. He gained a high ledge of stone, turned to look back.

Away across the valley were brilliant patches of yellow and red, so vivid in the sunshine that they shocked the eye. Topping the alien trees, each was composed of smaller,

individual splashes of colour. He stared at them, and remembered the scent, most strong under the trees, but detectable even where he stood.

"Blossoms," he whispered.

The outsides of the unopened buds were brilliant yellow; the interiors of the more mature flowers, bright red. They stood everywhere in the sun, and he saw that in a few more days, at most, the whole valley, seen from above, would be a mass of scarlet blooms.

What would happen then? he wondered.

He looked down upon the scene for a long time. More buds were opening, so that yellow patches slowly became crimson. In some strange manner the sight seemed to emphasise the alien nature of the great plants more than anything before had done. Earth was rapidly becoming uninhabitable for men.

His gaze moved slowly round, and halted again. At a great distance, down across the valley, he could see obliquely among the trees. Standing under them, looking towards him, were a man and a girl. He screwed up his eyes, striving to pierce the intervening distance. The girl was of medium height. She might be Judy—she *could* be Judy, though the distance was too great for him to be sure. She seemed to be looking at him, and he waved.

There was no response. They had not seen him standing against the dark rocks. He shouted, though aware that it might be dangerous to make his presence known to anyone, or anything, nearby. No reply came, or sign, and he decided that they had not heard him.

They went on, from view. Bitterly disappointed, he tried to judge the path they would take. He might be able to reach them, he thought. Or, again, he might fail, especially if they turned aside.

That chance must be risked. He lifted his pack and quickly descended over the rocks. He judged that the point where he had seen them was at least a mile away, and fumed as he scrambled over the hindering roots which everywhere extended among the boles of the shimmering trees.

The way proved difficult to follow, and eventually the light began to fail. Darkness came soon under the foliage, and with it a distant twittering, like birds very far away, began. Increasingly uneasy, Peter halted at a stream which unexpectedly crossed his path. Roots trailed far out into it, but he saw that he could not gain the opposite bank except by swimming, and hesitated.

Voices sounded across the water, and the pair came into view. Peter experienced a shock. The tall, slender man was Allen, who had helped him to escape. . . . The girl was behind him, more in shadow, but could have been Judy. . . .

More of the tear-drop forms, which he had come to recognise with dread, were following the pair, moving high up in the trees. Silent, quite still, he watched. In some odd manner the shapes seemed unaware of the exact location of the two they followed; they moved sideways back and forth along the fringe of the watercourse as if searching.

The couple went from sight. The shapes followed them, and Peter decided he would cross. Back up the stream the banks came more closely together, the water running deeply, and entwined roots made an insecure bridge. As he crossed he wondered if he could reach Allen and his companion without attracting the attention of the searching alien forms. It did not seem wise to call.

He moved cautiously along the watercourse, eyes and ears keenly active. No man could ever have faced greater personal danger, he thought. The things he feared, like the growths from which they had sprung, were mysterious, and therefore more terrible. He had never seen one clearly—had never been able to distinguish its true outline, or discern how it moved along up in the trees. . . .

A scarcely audible sound made him look back. One of the pendulous objects hung closely behind him, up among the shadowy fronds. It began to descend, sidling round the trunk like a patch of gloom that tricked his eyes. Another came behind it, rustling through the thick leaves, and Peter felt abrupt panic.

Ahead, many others hung, not moving from their positions,

but swaying slowly from side to side. He froze, eyes searching round frantically. More pendulous forms had appeared across the stream, moving rapidly along the fringe of trunks. . . .

He began to hurry, but they bobbed along in the trees, never clearly seen, but always surrounding him. He realised that they were becoming more numerous, and gradually allowing him to come nearer and nearer, until he was closely encircled. Only a rustling of disturbed leaves told of their movement. Some hung quite still, almost like enormous pears . . . others went from tree to tree, their pointed ends usually descending and trailing after them as they moved. . . .

Unexpectedly, without warning, a dead weight fell on him. He stumbled, driven to hands and knees. The weight increased, forcing him down upon his face, pressing so horribly that he thought his spine would crack. A suffocating closeness surrounded him; he strove to move, and could not. Arms, legs and body were pinioned. A light seemed to explode in his head, and then blackness descended. . . .

## CHAPTER EIGHT

PETER slowly awoke, aching, and surprised at being alive. Sun shone on the trunks sloping over the stream. His vision slowly cleared, and he sat up painfully. His limbs felt as if they had been compressed and kneaded, so that breathing pained his sore ribs.

The earth around him had been flattened, and was dotted thickly with tiny, conical depressions. Each was true and circular as if made by a rotating instrument, and his flesh crept as he looked at them. He rose shakily, quivering.

They could have killed him, he thought. Why hadn't they? There would be a purpose. . . .

He strove to remember what had happened during the intervening hours. There was a dim memory of being carried quickly through the trees, though it might have been a figment of his unconscious mind. Now, he stood exactly where he had fallen. He frowned, wondering whether there was some concealed purpose here, too. It was impossible to know, because the creatures were not of Earth, and could not be judged by standards with which he was familiar.

He examined the conical pits, then went on. Bright sunshine sparkled on the silvery grey trunks. The alien trees were beautiful, he thought. No one could deny it.

He wondered what Richard Symes would make of his experience. It should afford a clue—if he knew where to look. At present it seemed only a puzzle with no solution, as incomprehensible as the pendulous shapes themselves.

His steps turned along the valley. If the pair had escaped, and maintained their direction, they would have gone this way, he decided. And secondly, it would bring him back to the overgrown town where Ivan and his uncle had stayed alone.

The buildings stood silent amid the countless trees, their lower roofs now hidden. Roots were tangled more thickly

at street level, making progress painfully slow. They caught about his feet, making him stumble. A carpet of tendrils covered pavement and road, letting him sink ankle deep. Cracked walls had collapsed, and the rubble was already partly concealed by new growth.

In a few brief years all that had been so laboriously raised by men would have collapsed below the endless forests. Relics of a great past; the libraries and knowledge that should have made the future glorious—everything would be destroyed by the alien trees. The universal desolation would only pass unnoticed because no human eye would be there to see it.

He took a remembered turning, crossed a road, and emerged into a square where a semicircle of ornamental stone showed where a fountain had once stood. Behind was the City College of Science, silent and still as an empty box.

He went in, listening. The rooms and corridors were silent, too, and he hurried through them. They were empty; the stairway rang to his ascending feet, but no one appeared to greet him. The cracked wall had fallen, leaving an upper hall gaping to the sky, and at last Peter halted, no longer able to deny the truth. Richard Symes and Ivan had gone.

He slowly returned to the room where they had spent that one tense night together. There was no disorder, but the wooden floor was covered with circular, abraded marks, each a tiny, saucer-shaped depression. He looked at them for a long time, his face bleak, then crossed to a desk under the high windows.

A notebook lay there, still open, and with entries in a round, flowing hand. "We could sleep," Peter read. "I see no other hope. If only they would bloom, then I should know."

Peter frowned, and turned back a page. The sheet was covered with chemical formulæ incomprehensible to his highly specialised mind. Had they dealt with mechanisms, he thought, then he would have understood.

He looked through the book, but everything except the few words he had first read proved outside his field of

understanding. He considered them again. Some essential clue seemed missing.

If the plants blossom, Peter thought. What did it mean? They had—but apparently Symes had not seen the vivid red masses of blooms.

"Still finding joy in productivity and working for our glorious future?" an even voice asked.

Peter turned quickly. Allen stood in the door. His raven hair was disordered, his clothing stained, but a sparkle of amusement was still on his humorous face.

"You couldn't look more surprised if you'd been shot," he said, coming in.

Peter looked behind him. Allen was alone. He crossed and sat down on the desk, his lanky frame bowed. He seemed even more thin, Peter thought, as if the past weeks had seen many moments of privation and want. His gaze took in the empty room.

"Where's Richard Symes?"

"He was gone when I came." Peter wondered how best to phrase the question which had leapt to his lips. "I saw you down by the stream last night. You were not alone, then——"

Allen turned serious eyes on him, and frowned. "Last night? No. You've made some mistake. I stayed here last night, with Symes and the boy. I had come through the edge of the town, and saw the lad."

"But—I saw you by the stream . . ." Peter breathed.

"Oh yes, we were there—but two nights ago."

Two nights ago, Peter thought. Two nights ago! What, then, had happened during the intervening hours? He felt the blood drain from his cheeks, and stared at Allen, who was watching him curiously.

"You're sure . . . ?"

"Absolutely. Sure as I am that our days of joyful and productive freedom are ended for ever."

So it was true, Peter thought. All those hours had passed—and he would never have known if Allen had not come. The nightmare now seemed believable . . . the memory of being

swept along high in the trees had been no fantasy. . . . So great was his shock, the question he had wanted to ask came back to mind only slowly.

"There was a girl with you, then," he pressed.

"Yes—my sister. I'm getting good at escaping, and naturally didn't leave her behind."

"I see."

Peter tried to keep the disappointment from his voice. He had hoped she was Judy. . . .

"Richard Symes is no fool," Allen stated, leafing through the notebook. "He'd got several ideas about these plants. He had studied them—he was something of a naturalist, besides being a first-rate chemist, by the look of things. The one thing that stumped him was lack of data."

"What could we do, even if we knew?" Peter asked. He wondered why he had allowed himself to hope so much, about Judy, when there had been so little cause for hope.

Allen gestured. "Perhaps nothing. But it would be nice to know. Curiosity is a strong emotion."

He looked down through the nearby window, his chin half sunken on his chest. "It must be like this everywhere," he said pensively. "There's no reason for supposing that only this area was affected. If it was, help would have come in from outside. No help has come. No planes have flown over. If we were in an isolated patch of trouble they'd be over thick as flies. No." He turned round, looking down at Peter. "It's like this everywhere. Judging by the way those damned things have rooted, the whole world must be covered with them. Some people might have survived, and started again, somehow. So we hoped, but not now. . . ."

Because of the pendulous shapes that moved through the trees, Peter thought. Those things, whatever they were, formed a dangerous enemy.

"Yet Symes was confident he had ideas worth developing," Peter pointed out.

"He did, but could be wrong. It wouldn't be the first time a man has followed a slim chance—and found it didn't work out."



"But his note about the blossoming?"

Allen shrugged and expelled his breath, looking tired. "I've no more notion what he meant than you have."

Peter nodded, and they were silent. The classroom was growing shadowy with evening, and his thoughts reverted to those hours which had been so unaccountably lost. No explanation of them seemed forthcoming.

"Symes may have had some plan," Allen said, moving from the window. "Don't ask me what—I don't know. The question is, why isn't he here? He could have gone himself, for some reason. Or there could be—other causes."

Peter looked through the window. The light was going fast. He wondered again why Allen was alone.

"It's time she was here." Allen seemed to have sensed the trend of his thoughts. "She said she was going on only a very little way to see if there was any food in the shops up the road, while I came straight here to find Symes."

It would have seemed quite safe, then, Peter decided. But when darkness came, concealing the entwined roots and making the city into a weird forest, things were different.

"We'd better go down and find her," he suggested.

The street beyond the fountain was a tangled, shadowy wilderness and Peter wondered how long it would remain safe for them to be out. He listened often, but heard nothing except the thin night wind that had arisen, and which sighed among the desolated buildings.

"She may have lost her way," Allen said. "It would be easily done, in this mess."

They went on towards the shops. The broad, glazed windows were broken by the pressure against them. Goods of no use to a starving populace rotted where they lay; there was no food.

A faint crying came on the wind. Peter halted, and saw that Allen had heard it too.

"A boy, Peter," he murmured.

Peter nodded. He wondered whether it was his fancy, or whether the voice was indeed Ivan's.

They turned down a side-road, trying to trace the sound.

It stopped, but began again, nearer, and ahead. A tiny form with ruffled golden hair was kneeling by railings over which rootlets had formed a blanket. Peter picked him up. It was Ivan, and he pointed below.

"Uncle Richard's down there. He slipped——"

They looked over the rails. Steep steps, half concealed by trailing roots, led down into the gloom. At the bottom, just visible, a man lay crumpled.

"He—he wanted c-chemicals," Ivan whispered.

Peter put him down and descended rapidly. Symes was unconscious, a bruise on his temple showing where the wall had struck him.

"I—I tried to lift him," Ivan said, his tears subsiding.

Allen came down the steps carefully. "Don't worry, son, we'll take him back."

With difficulty they got him to street level, and began the journey through the overgrown roads to the College. Almost complete darkness shrouded the building when they reached it, and they took him into the empty classroom where folded blankets made a narrow bed.

"Pity my sister isn't here," Allen said. "She'd know what to do."

Symes moved slightly, his breathing growing stertorous. "The plants have bloomed," he whispered. "I must have a flower, a single flower. . . ."

"He's rambling," Allen decided.

Peter bent over the blanketed form, listening. Rambling—perhaps so. But this tied up with the words in the notebook!

"A single bloom would do," Symes murmured. "A single bloom. Then I shall know—whether we can lie down to sleep."

Peter sat back on his heels, frowning. It seemed that Allen was right. Yet Symes's voice, though weak, had appeared to ring with conviction and sanity. He caught the glint of eyes, and saw that Symes's lids were raised.

"I—I smelt their scent on the air." The voice was weaker. "When the wind blew the town was full of it. They were red. . . ."

"I've seen them," Peter said quietly.

Symes caught his arm weakly. "Don't you see—don't you see?"

Abruptly he was quiet. Allen bent over him, and stood up.

"He's fainted, I think. He looks in a bad way, but he'll be all right."

Peter drew in his lips, compressing them. "To repeat your words, he's no fool," he said. "I'm going to get that blossom!"

Allen gave an exclamation. "What earthly use will that be? It can't serve any useful purpose."

"Symes seemed to think it could."

"Then he's raving!"

"We'll see," Peter said.

He felt he was not mistaken: there had been the ring of sanity in Symes's voice. He could not pretend to explain, but felt no chance should be overlooked. Richard Symes was a man whose intellect he had quickly learned to respect; if he wanted a blossom from the alien trees, then he should have a blossom.

"If you're so sure, what did he mean about lying down to sleep?" Allen asked.

Peter did not reply. He could not. He could only hope that everything fitted, eventually, into one logical pattern, and that Richard Symes would prove himself justified. It was a slender hope, he thought wryly, but men in a position such as theirs must take what chance offered.

## CHAPTER NINE

THE night passed slowly. Allen went out, and did not return. Peter slept fitfully, awaking whenever Symes moved and groaned in his sleep. Ivan rolled himself in blankets and lay beside his uncle, very still, but when Peter looked at him he saw that the lad's eyes were open, glinting in the darkness.

"Will Uncle Richard get better?" he whispered once.

"Of course, son."

Peter felt less sure than he wished to suggest. The blow appeared to have been heavy, probably the result of a head-long fall down the treacherous steps. That some measure of concussion had arisen seemed likely.

The night seemed full of sound; whether from the wind that shook the windows and trees, or from other activity, Peter could not be sure. Once masonry near at hand fell, a startling, abrupt noise, and the floor trembled. Peter sat up quickly, listening. The questing roots would eventually bring down all the buildings in ruin, he thought helplessly. It was clearly unsafe to stay.

Towards morning Symes became increasingly restless, moaning and trying to raise himself. Some problem obviously occupied his wandering mind and in rambling phrases he talked of the days when he had become a junior master. Peter spoke to him reassuringly, but Symes's eyes gazed through him, and he went on muttering.

When the dim first light of dawn came through the windows Peter went below. Many little conical depressions pitted the floor of the corridor from the main door, and he could not be sure whether they had been there when he had entered the night before.

He went round the College. The end of the damaged

wing had collapsed. When he returned Allen was standing in the obscured doorway.

"I found Sis in the last store down the row," he said. "We thought it best to stay until it was light. She's upstairs looking at Symes."

"It's not safe to stay here another night," Peter said. They went into the dark corridor. "The building will collapse in the end, as will the others. And there are other dangers."

"I know," Allen agreed.

If he noticed the circular marks he did not speak of them. They ascended to the upper classrooms.

"It would be wise to get Symes and the boy back to the tunnel," Peter declared. "That seems as good a place as any." He wondered how Sam Ravenloe and Weygand were faring, and whether the steel sliding door remained intact. "You and your sister could stay there, too. I have other plans, for myself——"

He pushed open the door. A girl was bending over Symes, her back towards them. Peter halted, his hand tightening on the knob, and motionless with surprise. She rose, turning and brushing the dark hair away from her face.

"Judy!" Peter whispered.

He found himself looking down into her brown eyes, moist with emotion, and her arms round his neck.

"Peter. . ."

She clung to him. Moments passed, and looking over her head Peter saw Allen with his brows raised quizzically.

"I didn't know you two were acquainted——"

They laughed at him, light-hearted with relaxed tension. "To think you never told me your name!" Peter said.

"It's Allen Kimble——"

"Of course. I know that now. There's a certain resemblance, too." He looked from Judy, whose cheeks glowed, to Allen. "I should have noticed it—and you mentioned she was a nurse, too. But there were so many other things to do."

"Allen never mentioned your name, either," Judy said. "He's rather good at escaping, and included me in his plan."

"Spotted her the very day she was brought in," Allen stated with satisfaction. "Anyway, it was easy to break out—the authorities had other things to occupy them."

They decided that it was unwise to remain in the city, and that it should be possible to carry the sick man in a litter contrived from a blanket. Peter realised that their danger was very real, but felt buoyant with new hope. Judy's presence, and the knowledge that she was unharmed, renewed his determination and he was almost lighthearted as they prepared to leave.

Richard Symes groaned as he was moved; his eyes opened, and seemed clear with full comprehension.

"We're not staying here," Peter told him. "It's not safe. Don't worry, we can carry you easily enough."

Symes made a tiny gesture of agreement. "Yes, *they* will come. . . ." He sank back. "You must take my equipment. Ivan will show you. It is essential. And I must have a blossom."

His voice faded to a whisper and his lips twitched. His colour had gone, leaving his face white as putty. "My head hurts. . . ." Voice almost inaudible, he seemed to be striving to convince them. "It's essential—*essential*. My work must not be—lost. It does not matter for myself, but if there ever be more men. . . ."

He sighed, and his eyes closed. Judy examined him quickly. "He should be all right," she said, "though it's a pity we have to move him."

Peter thought of the circular marks he had seen, and exactly resembling those around the spot where he had lain.

"We have to go—and soon, if we're to reach the tunnel before dark."

"How about this equipment of his?" Allen asked.

"I plan to take it, if possible. The boy will show us. Left here, it may be damaged."

Peter hoped that the burden would not be too much for them when Ivan took him into the adjacent room and showed where his uncle had been working. Phials and retorts stood in racks, flanked by tubes of many substances. A compli-

cated apparatus of many glass and rubber tubes occupied the centre of a table, and a large box of chemicals stood near it.

"Uncle brought these from the shops," Ivan said.

The whole could scarcely be carried by one man, Peter decided. They would have to take the items which seemed most important, and return for the remainder if an opportunity came. The load would be a heavy one—and fragile.

Ivan had been watching him with serious eyes. "Uncle Richard told me it was very important."

"So it may be." Peter began to pack the smaller items. "We'll take what we can. Judy and you will be able to carry some——"

The boy nodded eagerly.

Nevertheless, loads seems to grow heavier, Peter thought as they wound through the trees beyond the city. The litter was awkward, and Symes had relapsed into unconsciousness. Allen was obviously finding the burden severe. Footing was treacherous, and the rubbery trunks that soared high into the leafy gloom overhead often so close together that the improvised stretcher could scarcely pass. Judy and Ivan followed closely, packs jingling on their backs.

"Allen and I could bring the stuff along tomorrow."

Judy smiled ruefully. "We'll do our best."

The strange scent that had come across the valley was in the air, and Peter knew that the great buds were opening, crowning the alien trees with colour. He looked up, but the fronds made an impenetrable screen through which not even the sky could be seen. Only a diffused brightness, filtering down, showed that the sun still shone. He wondered why Richard Symes wanted one of the strange blooms. No explanation was apparent.

The sun was low when they reached the overgrown exit and the upright metal rod. Symes had opened his eyes, but still appeared very weak. He looked at the packs as they were set down, and then at Peter.

"I hope you'll never regret the trouble you've taken," he said quietly.

Peter folded the blanket. "I'm going to get you that blossom!"

He went among the trees, choosing one which sloped a little, and where crossing boughs made climbing easier. The trunk was slightly resilient like hard rubber, and afforded a ready grip for his hands and knees. He reached a fork, and stood in it, looking up. He saw the remains of one of the bulbous swellings opened and shrivelled, resembling the husk of a huge pod from which the fruit had been removed.

He ascended further, drawing down the fronds until a giant bud came within reach. As large as a man's head, it was tightly closed and on a rubbery stem thick as his wrist. He twisted it off and began to descend.

Richard Symes was seated on an upraised root near the tunnel exit.

"It should be possible to tell," he said softly, as he took the huge bud. He looked at the yellow object closely, then raised his head. "Where can I set up my apparatus?" His voice was suddenly impatient; he tried to rise, shaking. "I should begin at once——"

Peter shook his head. "Not until you've rested, and feel better. The first task is for us to get your stuff down below."

He hoped that they had at last found sanctuary, and wondered what Sam Ravenloe would have to report. Judy and Allen had gone below, but not yet returned. He had not followed them immediately only because it seemed wise to pick the bloom while daylight remained, and he turned to the hole and began to descend.

Ravenloe pulled at his long chin, the pleasure and welcome on his face readily visible. An oil lamp, vastly improved from the first crude attempt, burned steadily at his side. "Things are fitted up snug," he said. "I haven't wasted time since you went away. If you ask me, we've got a good chance of making a nice little camp here—except for one thing."

Peter's eyes strayed to the closed sliding door. "They've given trouble . . . ?"



Ravenloe shook his head. "No, not that." He looked round. Allen and Judy were unpacking the apparatus. Ivan had gone back up the tunnel. "It's the supervisor," Ravenloe said. "If you ask me, he's gone off his head——"

"Weygand!" Peter was startled. "I noticed he wasn't here."

Ravenloe jerked his thumb towards the sliding door. "He's behind there! I woke up one morning and found it open. He was going in; said he didn't believe in waiting to be strangled while he slept. I could see he was crazy by the very look of him. I told him I'd have to close the door. 'Close it then,' he said, 'but that won't keep them out, if they want to get through.' A few minutes after I heard shots down one of the tunnels, then him laughing. Gave me the creeps."

Peter felt shocked. "How long ago was that, Sam?"

"Two days. He's still there. I heard him shouting, and called back, but he didn't answer."

With a shudder Peter thought of the supervisor roaming the myriad tunnels of the underground city, a weapon in his hand and his mind unhinged by fear.

"He had a light, Sam?"

Ravenloe nodded sombrely. "Yes, but it couldn't have lasted this long. . . .

Symes and Ivan came in, and they dropped silent. After a time they closed the exit door and settled down to sleep. Peter's last thought was that with steel doors at the only entrances and hundreds of feet of rock above, they could at least feel completely safe.

He awoke to frenzied hammering on the inner door. A voice was crying for it to be opened, alternatively swearing and loud with urgency. Sam Ravenloe started to his feet at Peter's side.

"It's Weygand. Told you he was crazy. Is it safe to open?"

"Safe or not, we can't leave him in there, Sam!"

They began to operate the door mechanism. The hammering had stopped momentarily and Ravenloe looked uneasy.

"Suppose *they* come through, Peter. . . ."

There was no means of assuring that no such thing happened, Peter thought. Yet it was inhuman to leave the door closed.

An inky gap appeared, widening. Through the slit showed Weygand's face, distraught, eyes red and burning, almost weeping as he clawed at the doors, striving to hasten their movement. He forced himself through, perspiration glinting on his ashen forehead.

"Close it! Close it!"

Ravenloc spun the control wheel. The gap began to draw narrower. A dull, heavy thud came, like a sack of grain being thrown against the door, and the steel quivered. Something thin flicked out through the slit, then was withdrawn as the door edges met with a click.

Weygand stood panting. His clothing was torn and the weapon he carried shook in his hand.

"Everything is finished," he said unevenly. "We're done. There's things I've seen!"

"They can't get by this door," Peter pointed out.

Weygand turned on him fiercely. "I've seen! I know! We're finished, I tell you—finished!"

Trembling, he moved away from the door, unsteadily like a drunken man. Ravenloc met Peter's eyes. Peter frowned.

"He's dangerous, Sam, with that gun, too," he said softly. "He's liable to shoot himself, or us, or do damage. Don't ask me what he's seen—but his nerve's gone."

From near the door they watched Weygand prowl round the bay and go from sight behind a high pile of empty cases. The others had been startled into wakefulness. Symes was sitting up; near him, Ivan had drawn the blanket up to his chin and his eyes were afraid.

"We must hope he'll quieten down. . . ." Peter said.

A shot echoed from behind the cases, ricocheted from the wall, and fell, spent. Peter's nerves jumped. He went towards the cases, wondering what he would see. . . .

Weygand came round them, his eyes wild and the weapon still smoking in one hand.

"One hiding behind there!" he snarled. "We can't get away from them. . . !"

Peter looked behind the crates. There was nothing. He came out slowly, shaking his head for the others to see.

Weygand turned on him.

"You think I'm a fool, Wrey!" he grated. "You always have! Well, I'm not—*see*! I'll not stay here and be murdered." He glared round savagely. "I'll not stay, and anyone who tries to make me will get a bullet for his pains!"

He stamped to the outer door, got it open, and passed through into the darkness. Sam Ravenloe crossed the bay slowly and closed the door. When it was tightly shut he made a gesture expressing defeat.

"See what I mean? Crazy from fear. He's liable to make trouble. Yet he's *human*—they're not. . . ."

True, Peter thought. And that fact put them under an obligation, even if Weygand's presence introduced a new element of uncertainty and danger.

The hour of dawn showed Richard Symes refreshed, though complaining of head pains still. He dissected the yellow bud with a patience cultivated by long experience, regardless of passing time. At last he raised his head; new colour had returned to his cheeks and a spark of animation shone in his eyes.

"It has all the characteristics of an annual," he said.

Peter felt disappointed. He had not known what to expect, but had anticipated some dramatic revelation. Perhaps it meant more to Symes, he thought.

"An annual?"

"Yes. I assumed that a plant, no matter how strange, would have a definite cycle of growth, flowering, and seeding."

Peter recalled the great scarlet areas of the valley. "You mean that when all those blossoms reach maturity, they will seed?"

"Yes. It may take a long time. I anticipate that it will. After the first appearance of the flower, some of our native

plants take several months for the seeds to reach maturity. These may take longer—much longer.”

“How much longer?”

“It’s impossible to decide—yet. That’s one of the things I hope to discover.”

Richard Symes relapsed into silence, his brow furrowed and his gaze bent upon the sections of the alien bud which lay near his instruments. Peter left him. The whole future was uncertain. They could make no safe camp on the surface, and the thought of hiding in fear underground, until at last their food was exhausted, repelled him.

Sam Ravenloe had been examining the crates which he had stacked neatly along near one wall of the bay. He stood motionless, hands in his pockets, gazing at them and Peter crossed to him.

“How are stores, Sam?”

“We shall be all right—for a short time.” Ravenloe scratched the top of his head. “After that—I don’t know. Oil for the lamps is shortest. We should be all right for water, as long as the supply pipes remain intact. There would be more food back there.” He jerked his head towards the deeper tunnels. “But it’s the very devil of a long way to walk, not to mention our friends in there, who might object to our company.”

Peter knew now that most of the crates were empty and their store of available food actually very small. “Then it looks like short rations, Sam.”

Ravenloe nodded, not speaking, and Peter wondered what the future would bring. There seemed to be no escape, no solution. . . .

Night and day came slowly over the surface of the planet and the continents grew more and more vividly red. With the first touch of the sun’s rays the tightly-closed buds began to open; a fringe of yellow advancing with dawn encircled the globe, followed by orange, where yellow and red blended. Behind, under the noon sky, was red alone, as the great blooms drank in the sunshine.

Within the hearts of the flowers complex processes began. The vegetation had blossomed quickly, but the changes that had begun to take place were infinitely slow. Solar radiation was trapped, and complicated chemical changes arose which were more exacting than any ever undertaken by the most skilled of men. An intricate photo-synthesis was set up, but formed only an intermediate stage in the preparation of an end-product of a type such as had never before originated on Earth. With infinite slowness the structure of molecules was being modified, so that at last atoms would arise which were almost indestructible, yet holding within themselves the ability to grow.

The plants had become the only form of life on all the scattered planets where they had appeared and flourished during millennia uncountable. They were so adaptable that no environment was too hostile for them to overcome. During the cycles of their growth they had flourished on hot planets adjacent to mighty suns, and upon the rocky, frigid outposts of scattered solar systems. Tiny, arid moons had seen their blooming, and steaming marshes had been hidden beneath them. Native life, when it had existed, had been swept away. Indigenous plants had wilted and died, crowded out; mobile creatures of infinite variety had succumbed to changed conditions and lack of food.

All futurity lay before the plants . . . all time, and all the billions of worlds which their drifting spores might eventually reach. . . .

## CHAPTER TEN

THEREFORE, that is my plan," said Richard Symes. They looked at him, silent. His face was intent, his eyes serious, and his voice rang with sincerity. At first they had interrupted him, putting questions. Later they had listened, gripped by the conviction in every gesture and word.

"So that's what you've been preparing for," Peter said.

Symes had been immersed over his notebooks and apparatus for many long hours, sleeping but little. He had not spoken of his eventual aim before, apparently unsure of success, and they had not questioned him. He had obviously thought deeply and long before beginning, and had presented his views succinctly, yet in complete detail.

"Everything depends on you not having made a mistake," Sam Ravenloe said pensively.

"It does." Symes spoke factually. "If you have a better plan, I am sure we should be glad to hear it."

Yes, there was danger in Symes's plan, Peter thought. Symes knew that, too. But circumstances seemed to leave no alternative. . . .

"I think we should try to make the inner tunnels safe, first," Peter suggested. He could never forget the danger behind the thin steel doors.

Symes nodded slowly. "I agree. It would be fatal if they came through when we could not protect ourselves."

The tunnels were dark and silent, each junction a yawning blackness beyond which anything might lie. Peter halted at crossing ways.

"It's hopeless, Sam."

Ravenloe held his lamp high, nodding. The yellow flame cast a weak radiance upon the walls and road, but did not

penetrate far ahead, or illuminate the many corridors which ran off at each side.

"If you ask me, we'll never find them, as long as they choose to keep out of sight," he said.

They went on under the hewn, curved roof. Peter wondered whether their plan would be successful—it had seemed easy to *talk* of luring their enemies out of the depths of the catacombs, out through the unloading bay . . . and then slip back and bar the main door against them. But no sign of the forms which he had not yet clearly seen upon even a single occasion had yet become manifest.

They passed another junction where the tunnels stretched away into complete gloom. Peter listened. The silence was so complete he could hear his companion's breathing, a trifle loud and rapid. He drew in his lips, striving to penetrate the darkness beyond their dim circle of light.

"It's not safe to go too far," Sam Ravenloe murmured. Peter knew he was right: it would be highly dangerous to penetrate too far into the maze of tunnels, and that had been no part of their plan. They had aimed to lead their pursuers out of the catacombs—not to be outflanked and trapped by them.

An abrupt chirruping sounded, so brief that they could not decide where it had come from. Peter met his friend's eyes and saw fear in them. Ravenloe's face was white, his expression startled. He looked round uneasily, and his cheeks twitched visibly.

"I don't like it, Peter," he said.

"Nor do I."

They went on a little way so that the junction was left behind. Scattered wooden boxes occupied a corridor door, half blocking it.

"Something's been happening here," Ravenloe whispered.

Peter looked cautiously down the corridor. An inner door stood open, its lock shattered. Bullets appeared to have ploughed through the wood.

"Perhaps Weygand barricaded himself in here," he suggested.

He looked in, holding the flickering lamp before him. A great, black shape like an enormous pear was standing against the wall near the door, half concealed by its panels. Peter felt the hair on his neck rise, and his throat run dry. The shape was pulsating slowly; its skin glistened like dark, shimmering rubber . . . it quivered, moving out from the wall.

Ravenloe's breath was expelled in a hiss of surprise; they jumped back, retreating down the narrow corridor, pushed past the boxes, and turned down the footway outside. Peter stopped, looking back. An outline, visible as a bulging curvature of shadow, came to the corridor exit, but did not emerge. A twittering echoed down the tunnel, loud and rapid, going on and on.

"It's calling its mates!" Sam Ravenloe whispered.

The twittering stopped; a rounded shape bulged momentarily from the exit, then was withdrawn. The strange sound began again.

They began to hurry back along the tunnel, often stopping to listen. The chattering sound ceased, and complete silence descended. When they moved their footsteps echoed from the featureless rocky walls. Peter halted again.

"Suppose we can't entice them out at all?" Ravenloe asked.

His voice receded in a dull murmur down the tunnel; many seconds seemed to pass before it had gone from hearing. Peter moved uneasily.

"We must, if we can, Sam."

He thought of the preparations Symes would be making; how all available stores had been set carefully in order, and one remote corner of the great loading bay partitioned off with empty cases. Symes's skill, alone, might not be sufficient.

A long time seemed to have passed. They went down another intersecting road and completely round a block where once offices had been. At one corner there had obviously been a terrible fight. They did not descend from the raised footway to the road level.

"Seems we're beaten," Ravenloe said at last.

Peter had been considering deeply. "If we do as Symes



plans, it will mean locking Weygand outside," he said uncomfortably. "That would be—inhuman."

Ravenloe began to lead the way back. "He doesn't seem to have worried about our safety."

"Even so, I don't like it."

Peter wondered whether such a decision would be forced upon them. Weygand was human—to deny him refuge would not be easy.

They began to ascend out of the deeper tunnels, where smoke still tainted the air. The corridor exits and junctions slipped away behind; their steps hastened; yellow light flickered on the walls, and they reached the last corner. Peter hesitated, looking round it slowly. The open doors were visible at the end of the tunnel, illuminated by a light beyond. From there to the farthestmost limits of their own circle of light stretched fifty paces of inky gloom.

"Seems we've failed," Sam Ravenloe said.

His voice conveyed a mixture of relief and disappointment. They walked down the echoing tunnel, pausing half-way to look back. Nothing moved in the gloom; no sound reached their ears.

At the door they stopped and Peter realised that moisture was cold on his brow and his nerves drawn tight as wire. From far away down the tunnel, just audible, came a continuous twittering—a thin, abominable sound which made him shudder involuntarily. Ravenloe looked round, the whites of his eyes showing strangely.

"If you ask me, they're as intelligent as any of us. . . ."

"Perhaps," Peter agreed. He felt keen disappointment at their failure. "We've done our best. It's up to us, now, to leave things to Richard Symes."

Ravenloe's face had a yellow, aged look, though the dim light concealed his wrinkles. "You're coming to do what he says?"

"What else, Sam? He's explained it all pretty clearly. Allen and he will have everything ready by now."

Ravenloe hesitated. "Suppose he's made a mistake? He only had one blossom——"

"I'm no botanist; I leave that to him. I assume all the blooms are the same—they look it."

They hesitated still by the open doors, listening. The chirping came no nearer; it seemed, instead, as if the beings from which it originated were waiting and watching, in no hurry to fulfil whatever purpose they had.

At last Ravenloe closed the doors. The edges met with a sharp click, cutting them off from the depths of the city. But it was a fragile barrier, Peter thought.

They went to the outer door, and up the tunnel. The sun shone above the alien trees, making a bright radiance, which filtered down. The air was warm and full of the scent of unseen blooms. Weygand was nowhere to be seen; they called once, loudly, but no reply came.

"We're—delaying the moment . . ." Peter said quietly.

"Yes. . . ."

Ravenloe made no sign of descending. They looked at the brightness above and breathed deeply of the clear air. A suggestion of moisture stood in Ravenloe's eyes.

"Earth wasn't a bad place . . ." he said.

"I know, Sam."

They went down the tunnel slowly; it seemed to reach down and down as if into the very core of the planet. Men had made it to hide from each other, Peter thought; now men were using it to hide from something from outside which was more powerful than themselves.

After a last backward look up the tunnel stretching to the Earth's surface they closed the door and locked it. In the yellow light Peter saw beads of perspiration glistening on Sam Ravenloe's forehead.

"It may be dangerous to wait," Peter said.

Symes had put a clean white smock over his stained clothing. He stood ready, watching them.

"I suppose we wish ourselves luck," Sam Ravenloe said unevenly.

They stepped forward to join the others.

A white-gowned figure moved slowly in the yellow light

whose unsteady rays made his shadow, huge and grotesque, dance on the hewn walls. Instruments glistened in his hands, sparkling of silvery metal and polished glass as he replenished them with cultures he had prepared and whose potency none but he himself understood. Working methodically, unhurried, he passed and repassed between the long bench which he had set up and the bunks against the wall. His quiet footsteps were the only sound in the chamber, except, sometimes, for a quick, tense exhalation of his breath, or the clink of the instruments on the bench as he moved them with sensitive fingers.

Once he looked at the closed steel doors, listening for a long time. Then he returned to his work, his lips moving as if from intense concentration.

Many, many long hours passed before he became still. He stowed away his equipment carefully and extinguished all but one of the lamps. Its dim, solitary light shone upon his face, white and tired with nervous tension and exhaustion, and upon the shining instrument that he poised, in turn, over the flesh of his own arm. . . .

Silent as a great mausoleum hewn as a tomb for the last of mankind, the chamber stood undisturbed by either movement or sound. The weak flame, soon to flicker out, scarcely drove away shadows from roof and walls, which drew nearer together as the last circle of light shrank.

The flame lingered on and on, then faded to a mere glow that shed no light and went out. Many long hours drifted by; nothing marked their passing.

Shatteringly abrupt, awesomely loud shots rang out against the steel door. The lock quivered; a shorn spring sang like plucked wire, its sound interrupted by an explosion. Metal fell to the concrete, and the door opened jerkily. A man entered, bearing aloft a flaming resinous stick. His wide shoulders brushed the partly opened door; his wide, round face was bearded, his bushy brows projecting over eyes wild and red in the reflected light. In his other hand the weapon still smoked and he swore, calling out.

Only echoes answered. He stood, scowling, then advanced slowly into the chamber, holding his smoking, flaring torch high. He filled his lungs, bellowing :

"Where are you. . . ?"

The echoes dwindled and silence returned. Scowling, he crossed the floor and hesitated before the inner sliding door. He dropped the weapon into a pocket, paused, then took it out again and jammed his burning faggot upright between two cases. With his free hand he began to open the doors, craning sideways to watch as the gap widened, his pistol raised.

When the doors were wide he waited for a long time before going through. The stick aloft, he went from view. His voice echoed as he called, growing more distant. Silence came, then slowly a dim radiance began to illuminate the rectangle of the open doorway. He appeared; his shoulders seemed to have shrunk in width, his face twitched, and his head was thrust forward, so that he seemed to stoop. A spark had died in his bloodshot eyes.

He began to wander round the cavern, mumbling. He passed the bench with its neatly stacked apparatus, scowled, and swept the equipment to the floor. Glass tinkled, shattering; slender instruments buckled as he stamped upon them.

"Gone, and left me," he stated.

His voice was thick with self-pity. He turned from the bench . . . and halted, his face blanching. Very slowly he stepped forward, bending to gaze down at the bunks close against the wall.

He stood there for a long time, not moving, horrified, his lips slightly parted as if for a cry which had never come. Sweat sprang to his face, glistening in the flickering light. Then his lips moved, trembling.

"Dead . . . all dead. . . ."

Abruptly he turned, the violence of his motion sending sparks flying from the brand. Its flame almost scorched his face, rising quickly in wreaths of thick smoke.

Tears stood on his cheeks; his eyes were wide with the remembered agony of seeing the six white, still, unbreathing

forms. Stumbling, he reached the exit door, hurried through, and began to ascend the exit tunnel. The sound of his awkward progress went from hearing and the flicker of his torch from sight. He did not return.

An immeasurably dim light filtered in through the open door, growing slightly stronger as noon came to the world above. It barely relieved the gloom of the chamber, and scarcely reached the open doors leading into the silent depths of the catacombs.

No human eye saw the shapes that began to move in the tunnels beyond the second doors; nor did human ear discern the thin sounds that began as woody, tympanic membranes were vibrated, beginning quite abruptly and going on and on.

Hours passed and the light began to fade. Shapes moved beyond the inner doors, coming through. Sometimes they advanced quickly; sometimes they remained motionless. Their shadowy outlines pulsed; sometimes they were silent; sometimes the tympanic membranes vibrated strongly, filling the chamber with thin sound.

Their numbers increased and they moved out into the hewn room, apparently unhindered by a deep gloom. Quite suddenly all their hesitancy ceased; they began to move quickly, searching the chamber from corner to corner and wall to wall, missing nothing. . . .

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**D**AYLIGHT and darkness came and went above the tree-tops, where uncountable millions of scarlet flowers opened and closed to the rising and setting of the sun. Weygand stood in the evening gloom, listening to the sigh of the wind in the foliage above and wondering whether he alone was the only living man on all the Earth.

He went on, looking for somewhere to hide. Unending glades of rubbery trunks extended in each direction, and from them began to come audible sounds not made by the wind. He hurried, remembering that far ahead was the shell of an empty house where he had once before found refuge. Remnants of a highway under his feet showed that he had judged his direction correctly, but he feared that the distance was perhaps too great.

The rustlings grew louder, punctuated by sounds as of birds awakening. He moved more quickly, pressing on, stumbling over unseen roots and avoiding entwined branches and trunks which made impenetrable thickets. Soon he knew that he was being followed. Dark shapes moved rapidly high in the alien trees and he began to run. Sometimes he fell, struggling to his feet with a quick glance back and swearing with fear and fierce desperation. The evening light was decreasing, and he suddenly knew that he had lost his way.

He halted, undecided, striving to distinguish the pendulous forms which he was sure surrounded him. There were shadows high up overhead; some moved, masses of foliage stirred by the wind; others seemed to be descending towards him. . . . He cried out aloud with fear and turned back the way he had come, running and stumbling like a hunted creature.

Perhaps he could find the tunnel, he thought. It at least seemed to offer some measure of protection.

The pendent shapes came after him, swinging along high in the trees, suspending themselves from the boughs and trunks. His breath came quickly, loud from exertion and fear, and at last he stopped, panting.

Shadows slowly materialised and hung themselves in the foliage above him, oscillating slowly from side to side like many pendulums keeping different time. He sobbed in terror, head turned back to look up at them. A few were beginning to descend, almost, it seemed, as if great insects lowering themselves on threads attached to the branches above. The sight lent him new energy, and he crashed away through the closely-growing vegetation ahead.

His pursuers followed. He did not know how long he ran, or where. Whenever he was still they gathered behind him, slowly drawing nearer. Whenever he ran they followed, swinging along quickly through the trees. More and more numerous, they were never far behind; only when he halted did they stop their rapid progress, hanging above him and only slowly drawing nearer.

Often he sobbed as he ran, half mad with the nightmare of it. Whenever he was still they seemed to halt their pursuit, drawing closer slowly, as if engaged in some terrible game. When he ran they followed, now so numerous that the whole tops of the trees bowed and creaked and rustled with the weight of their passing.

He was spent when he realised that a metal bar projected ahead of him, and that broken concrete was beneath his feet. Gasping, he almost fell into the tunnel entrance, groping for the way below.

He seemed to be fighting his way through roots and stems which moved of their own volition to trap and hold him. He tore at them, hands bleeding, his breathing convulsive, his terror-filled eyes searching wildly for some guiding light in the surrounding inky blackness.

Half-way down the tunnel he slipped backwards, one leg jammed into the notch between almost parallel roots. He strove to free himself, and could not. The stems all about

him entangled with his arms and he sank back, half-suspended by his trapped leg. He sobbed, swearing vividly.

Shapes came down the tunnel and over him and his voice ceased. For a long time the shapes were still, then they went on quickly, descending through open doors into the rocky chamber beyond. . . .

Years more than the lifetime of men passed while the strange processes arising in the long-lasting blooms moved slowly towards completion. Seeds of such complexity that no Earthly science could have analysed them developed to maturity. Chemical changes arose between elements drawn from the planet's soil and elements created by the blossoms themselves. Combinations antipathetic to the Earth's gravity arose, achieved only after long mutation of special substances. On their creation depended the ability to survive, which the genus possessed. Uncountable generations of evolutionary advancement lay behind the plants, which had already existed when the Earth was molten, and they had achieved near perfection.

As the years came and went the scarlet petals dried and fell away to nothing, leaving round, hardening nodules of seeds numerous as the stars of the heavens. Slowly, under the influence of air and sun, the nodules ripened.

The slow ripening was simultaneous throughout all the continents of the planet. The seed clusters slowly grew dark, and all the tops of the alien trees faded to a duller hue. The fronds of vegetation grew less lushly as the time for seeding grew near, but the trunks stood strong and hard, their roots going deep.

Stout with a century's thriving growth, the roots ate down through soil and rock. Huge stones crumbled under the relentless pressure, lifted upwards. Cracks ran through the rocky strata, so that the whole planet's surface for many hundreds of feet down was disturbed and raised up in jagged blocks and fragments.

Down a valley, a mountain side hard as granite had collapsed, rumbling and bounding down to block the water-



course below. Roots consolidated the mass, making of it a huge, immovable ridge that dammed the valley itself. Waters began to rise against the irregular wall, falling very low with summer, but rising higher when winter rains came and the rocky mass became more compacted. Slowly the valley filled with water, its level rising and rising until it reached a huge crevasse cracked open in the sloping ground. Snow lay thickly on the hills and trees, and melted when warm rain came. Brown water gurgled and sucked down the crevasse, torrenting in a cataract to lower levels.

The waters followed a subterranean cleft, sweeping it wider by their own force. They torrented down tunnels and corridors hewn by the hands of men, submerging dusty, yellowing fragments . . . giving a final burial. A roof had collapsed, blocking the way the current strove to go; the water began to mount, swirling backwards up the sloping tunnel. The lip of the flood, brown from soil, lapped through sliding steel doors which stood wide, and began to sweep out over the floor of the chamber. There, they continued to rise steadily, first flooding the whole area of the floor, then beginning to creep higher and higher up the rocky walls.

On the Earth above rain torrented from leaden skies, dancing on the lake which had formed and bringing its level slowly higher. Thunder echoed along the hills; lightning played vividly from heaven to earth, illuminating the sombre masses of cloud which released rains so heavy that rivulets bubbled and danced down the higher slopes.

The water in the cavern rose, never hesitating. It submerged rusting instruments and broken glass equipment which had been flung from a long bench, and gathered around bunks which stood silent against the remotest wall. There, it rose relentlessly, soaking into the folded blankets, creeping nearer and nearer to the forms that lay as still as if in death.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**S**LOWLY. Peter woke as if arising from a deep sleep. Dreams there had been, sometimes, but so deep, that they had slipped away from recall. He was conscious of stiffness and hunger, and a cold, clammy wetness in the blankets on which he lay. Only slowly did memory return; with it came excitement, curiosity, and fear.

He sat up, the movement making every sinew of his body jump in agony, and opened his eyes against the weight which seemed to drag his lids down. The darkness was so extreme he thought for a moment that he was blind. Somewhere far in the distance water gurgled.

A ledge ran along the wall near above his head, and he remembered that they had placed a lamp there, and matches from the precious stock Allen had provided. Fumbling, he took down the packages and began to tear away the moisture proof wrappings in which they had placed them. His fingers were stiff, his impatience almost unendurable. He dropped the matches, found them on his knees, and struck one into spluttering life. A dim, yellow radiance spread from his upraised hand, glinting on the surface of dark water that came to the very edge of his bunk. The match went out. Shocked by what he had seen, he ignited another, and a third, and lit the oil wick.

Only slowly did he take in the scene. A weakness overcame him so that he almost let fall the lamp. With an effort he returned it to the ledge and leaned back, resting.

The shock began to pass slowly, and his thoughts turned to the others, and the world above. He wondered whether they had achieved success—or been met by horrible failure.

He opened his eyes and got up slowly, sitting on the edge of the bunk with his feet ankle deep in water. His head swam again, and many long minutes passed before he could drag himself to the next bunk and draw back the blanket.

The sight froze him with shock. Empty eye sockets in a yellowing skull grinned up; skeleton ribs projected like the wickerwork of an inverted basket . . . he drew the tattered blanket back over the form, closing his eyes with weakness . . . then sat down unsteadily in his own place.

The faintness passed and he strove to remember the positions in which they had lain down to sleep. What he had seen proved that Richard Symes's plan had succeeded, in part. Many years had passed—the condition of the remains under the blanket testified to that. But only in part had that plan succeeded: one had died.

*One, he thought suddenly, shuddering into full wakefulness. Suppose he was the only one who had lived?*

He arose stiffly, clutching at the lamp, and splashed to the nearest bunk at which he had not yet looked. Fingers shaking, he drew down the blanket. Ivan lay there, white as alabaster, and not visibly breathing. His flesh appeared almost transparent, preserved like shiny wax.

Peter experienced an urgent longing to know what had happened to the others, and who was dead. . . . Half way to the next bunk, he halted. Splashing, made by some object in motion, sounded distantly. For the first time he realised that the sliding doors at the entrance to the deeper tunnels were open. The sounds came from beyond them, suggesting forms that were struggling through the water towards freedom.

They could be one thing only, he thought—creatures of the alien trees, driven from some chamber or corridor by the rising flood.

He floundered to the operating mechanism, almost falling, and struggled with the wheel. It would not turn. Jammed by long disuse, or by silt carried into the groove in which the doors moved, the steel panels remained wide. He cursed his weakness, the chill besetting his limbs, and the stiff immobility of his joints. The splashing was very near—would soon be at the door. . . . He blew out the light, standing rigid against the wall.

Something came through the open panel, hesitated, then began to labour across the chamber, emitting tiny, high-pitched twitterings. No glimmer of light relieved the utter dark, and Peter stood motionless as the rock at his back.

The sounds moved away, hesitated, then slowly receded from hearing. Peter realised that the other door of the unloading bays was open also, and that the living being that he could call by no known name had gone, ascending the tunnel. He listened, wondering if others of its kind remained in the lower labyrinths of the city. It seemed likely. The matches were on the ledge, and he began to wade across in the dark.

A chill disappointment and sense of failure began to oppress him. Their enemy—the enemy of all mankind—still existed. Symes could have been wrong. If so, they had endured mental agonies for nothing. It had not been easy to lie down and feel the sting of the hypodermic injecting solutions of a kind known only to Symes, and not know whether death awaited, or only the suspension of animation which Symes prophesied. As Sam Ravenloe had said, there was no alternative. Only because of that had they agreed.

Peter kindled the hesitant wick and heard a feeble groan nearby. A blanket rose grotesquely, and a thin, white face, topped by jet hair. Peter found himself gazing into Allen's eyes; the lips twitched half with amusement and half with pain.

"Still busy trying to preserve our glorious destiny . . . ?"

He sank back, his features in shadow, and began to rub his arms with laborious slowness.

"There's water—it's rising," Peter said. His voice sounded strange: cracked and hoarse even to his own ears. "We can't stop here."

Moments passed, then Allen slowly raised himself again. "So we're driven out, and no choice. . . ."

"Looks like it," Peter agreed.

From beyond the circle of light a grunt came, followed by silence, and then by the sound of awkward movements. "If

you ask me, we're half drowned already," a voice complained. "Filthy wet, cold as murder to me feet. . . ."

"*Sam*," Peter said.

Ravenloe murmured something incomprehensible, swearing. "Who's there?" His voice was stronger. "This is the daftest trick I've ever been party to. Never let me complain again about the old days."

He subsided into muttering, and Peter thought again of the sign of failure which he had uncovered. Who then . . . *who*? The question demanded answer.

He got up shakily and walked along the bunks, carrying the flickering lamp. The water seemed to have risen a little, and its distant gurgle sounded loudly in the chamber. Ivan still slept, though a trace of colour had come to his cheeks and his chest rose and fell slowly. Sam Ravenloe was pulling at his long chin, sitting up with one arm lapped round his knees, and complaining that his legs seemed dead.

"Your circulation will come back in a few minutes," Peter told him.

He went on, tense with an agony of doubt. His fingers shook as he drew down the blanket, and his breathing halted in the extremity of his suspense.

Judy lay there, her eyes closed, her hands folded together. Still as marble—yet whole; white—yet with the clear, waxen whiteness of Ivan. Peter looked down at her for a long time, then turned away.

"Richard Symes is dead," he said quietly. He wondered why: that was a thing they would never know. Perhaps there had been insufficient of some essential substance, at the end. Or perhaps Symes had kept silent about something he himself knew—that self-administration of the hypodermic was hazardous.

"He was a brave man," Allen murmured.

Yes, Peter thought, *brave*. The element of personal sacrifice was clear, now. He wondered whether it had all been to no purpose.

Ravenhoe moved along the beam, and returned, sitting down. "How long do you think it will be before they come round?" he asked.

Peter shook his head. "Can't say, Sam."

"Perhaps we could wake them, or carry them up. Seems to me it's either that or leaving them here to drown."

Peter held his light aloft. The water had risen, but not rapidly.

"Remember how deep we are below ground," Allen said, watching him. "If this inflow continues it's only a matter of time until the place is flooded to the roof. In any case, we should be able to go up, now——"

Peter drew in his lips. "I think Symes has misjudged," he said. "I'm not sure it's safe, after all."

He saw the hope die on the other's face. Allen frowned. "You mean——"

"It hasn't turned out quite as he thought. . . ."

Peter dropped silent, listening, and snuffed out the light. Irregular splashing sounded again in the deeper tunnels. It drew nearer, apparently caused by several forms. An eerie chirping filled the bay, echoing sharply from walls and ceiling. In the stygian dark the sound made Peter's flesh chill, and objects moved across the floor towards the outer door. Many minutes passed before they had gone, ascending the tunnel. He shuddered, and kindled the lamp.

"You see what I mean," he said.

Allen nodded. "They're still here—and doubtless still in the forests above."

"Ycs. And if so, then Symes was wrong, and we're finished. I had felt doubtful." It had all depended on Symes, Peter thought, and now he was dead.

Allen appeared not to be listening. "I have a theory of my own about those things that passed through just now," he said. "It's my belief that they can hear but have no sight. That explains why they left us alone when we were still—they wouldn't know we were there, or be able to distinguish us from any other object. If they heard us move they'd know we were alive."

"But they went straight across and up the tunnel," Sam Ravenloe objected.

"That can be explained, too. They could locate the position of objects by the echoes. The noise they made was high-pitched—and remember bats can guide themselves by listening to echoes in that way. There would be no echo from the door; they would know there was no obstruction there, and go to it."

It seemed logical, Peter thought. Alien beings who did not even know vision existed could have developed such ability. He wished, now, that he had kept on the light, to see them cross to safety. . . . It could explain, too, why they had not harmed him in the forest. He had been as still as if he were dead. Perhaps they had watched a long time, then taken him to some dense thicket when dawn approached. That was a thing he would never know; it was best, perhaps, for men not to know some things, he thought. Mankind tended to judge everything by familiar standards, and things not of the Earth could not be evaluated by such standards. They didn't fit any longer.

Allen could be right, Peter thought, and he nodded. "Our first need is to get out of here," he said. "We must carry Judy and Ivan up, if they don't wake."

They agreed, and he wondered what they would find when the surface was reached. Then, and only then, could Symes's beliefs be proved or disproved. Those beliefs were based on his examination of a single bloom. They could be wrong, Peter thought uneasily. Yes, they could be wrong.

The exit tunnel proved to be blocked by thick masses of twisted roots, and Peter saw that it would be many hours before they could reach surface level. Only the repeated passing of the beings from the plants had kept open a way amid the roots, but even that could not be negotiated by a man.

A little distance beyond the exit doors, almost hidden by stems and rootlets, he found a skeleton. It appeared to have

been there for a very long time, and hung backwards, with its head down, held together only by the tendrils encircling it. Below, as if dropped from one of the bony hands, was a pistol. So Weygand had come back, he thought. He took up the weapon, but it was corroded and its magazine empty.

Unable to go further, he returned to the chamber below, where the dim yellow light showed that the water was rising without interruption.

"I think the flow is increasing," Allen said.

Peter nodded. He supposed that they could force a passage up to the surface. Though drowning was an imminent danger, it was not the gravest afflicting them. That would arise if they reached the surface—and found no sanctuary there.

Allen had been watching him. "You're afraid that we—haven't slept long enough," he stated abruptly. "I can see that. You suspect that things up above will be the same as before, with the plants everywhere——"

"I do," Peter said.

He turned away abruptly and examined Ivan and Judy. Both seemed in exactly the same state as when he had looked at them before. Both appeared to be in deep sleep, but their skin was cold to the touch.

"Seems to me they had a stronger dose—or it affected them more," Ravenloe decided, peering at them by the flickering light of the lamp.

Peter straightened. "Perhaps, Sam. Meanwhile, we must clear the tunnel enough to let us get out."

They began to work amid the roots, and he soon realised how weak they were. They had eaten from the sealed provisions stored on the ledge, but their strength was slow to return. In many places the narrow, winding passage was too small for them to pass, and the rooty, surrounding growth was almost immovable. A very long period of time had elapsed; during it the plants had become more and more firmly established.

"Weygand must have opened the doors," Peter said as they passed the skeleton. "By doing that he saved our lives.



If those—*things* hadn't come up and down through here, the tunnel would have been blocked quite solid."

After many intervals of rest, and many long hours of muscle-straining labour, they saw daylight ahead. Peter experienced a new excitement. Soon, he thought, would become apparent the truth of Symes's conjecture—if he had been correct.

Ravenloe came from below, ascending the way they had cleared.

"The water's rising faster," he said with obvious concern. "It's not safe to leave them down there any longer."

Peter dragged his gaze away from the tantalising glimpse of daylight, and they descended together. The water was above knee level, and rising more rapidly. He supposed that distant rooms and corridors had become full, so that the inflow from above was now sweeping into the unloading bays alone.

With extreme care they took the two sleepers some distance up the tunnel. Peter looked at Judy with new tenderness, his concern returning now that the forgetfulness afforded by physical effort had momentarily ceased. He wondered if she was the last woman alive on all the Earth. It seemed likely. No people could have survived above; no children could have been born, and lived.

*They themselves were the last people on Earth.*

When he regained the exit it was quite dark. Clouds—or vegetation—hid the sky, leaving the blackness overhead unrelieved by moon or stars. He withdrew into a recess of the tunnel and settled down to sleep.

Tired and aching though he was, sleep did not come easily. Richard Symes had planned that they should sleep until the Earth could once again be man's—and it seemed to be more and more certain that Symes had been wrong. The presence of the beings in the catacombs below suggested he was wrong; the entwined roots through which they had struggled, and the blackness overhead—all hinted that he had erred.

The terrible doubt would not be stilled. Peter asked himself who could sleep while the whole destiny of mankind

remained undecided. How could he lie down and rest, not knowing?

He would go up, he thought at last. There might at least be some hint to settle the question in his mind. He rose slowly, crawling again up the tunnel.

A gentle night air blew upon his face and he stood at the exit for a long time, breathing deeply. Then he moved on, feeling his way cautiously. Giant roots crossed his path, each fully as round as his body and knee-high above the earth. He sat down on one, listening and raising his face towards the heavens.

Nothing relieved the complete darkness. Such gloom could not be caused by cloud, he thought. Only the vast, spreading foliage of the alien trees could thus conceal the sky. It seemed, then, that Richard Symes had been wrong.

Once a distant twittering came on the air. He listened to it, not moving, feeling and emotion almost gone. Yes, he thought, Symes had been wrong.

After a long time he tried to find the tunnel entrance, but could not. He searched for a little while, then sat down with his back to high roots. The entrance must be nearby, he thought, fatigued. With dawn, it could be found.

Sad, so tired that nerves and mind were numbed, he slept at last, propped against the roots.

He awoke into the dim greyness of a full hour before dawn, with a young voice sounding nearby. Ivan came among the trees, his small face alive with wonder. Behind him, moving stiffly, walked Ravenloe. His wrinkled features were screwed up, but his eyes brightened.

"Thought maybe you'd come out," he said.

Peter rose awkwardly. "And Judy . . . ?" he asked eagerly.

"She's still—asleep." Sam Ravenloe waited until Ivan had gone a little way. "I haven't told him about his uncle yet," he said. "Time enough for that later."

Peter looked around and above. The strange trees extended as far as he could see. Overhead, the sky lay hidden beyond

thick fronds. The trees were older, snarled and weathered, but still there.

Ivan came back, walking more soberly. "Was—it *always* like this?" he asked.

"He's forgotten," Ravenloe murmured.

Peter felt unendurably sad. The boy's words summed up what they all felt so poignantly.

"No, lad," he said. "Not always."

They were silent.

"There's a lake in the valley," Ivan said at last. "Ever so big."

Peter did not answer. It was from there that the water had come, he supposed. But he did not want to see it, or go on to see the mouldering rubble where the town had been. All the buildings would have collapsed long ago, he thought. There would be no streets—only mounds of concrete, stone and brick, overgrown by the mighty trees.

He turned abruptly and looked for the tunnel entrance. Allen was sitting moodily by it, but did not get up.

"So Symes was wrong," he said.

Peter nodded. "So it seems."

He descended slowly. Judy was where they had placed her, but showing signs of renewed animation. He chafed her hands, and after a long time her eyes opened. They cleared, and settled on him.

"Peter. . . ."

"We're all right," he said. "So is Allen. Don't worry."

She relaxed, breathing deeply, her colour slowly returning. Peter thought of the wilderness above, and of their helplessness, and swore under his breath. Things could have been so very different.

At last she opened her eyes again. "I—I believed it could work," she whispered. "I believed in Richard Symes—he was a clever man."

"He's dead," Peter said quietly.

"Oh." She leaned back, sighing, then looked at him. "The others——?"

"They're all right—all of us. Even the lad." No need to say more, now, Peter thought. "Rest—then we can go up," he suggested. "I know how you feel."

They went up out of the root-encircled hole together. The others were not in sight, but their voices sounded a long way ahead under the avenues of trees.

"Let's go that way," Peter suggested.

They made their way slowly over the roots. Dawn seemed near, now, and a stronger light filtered down through the spreading branches. At one point Peter stopped abruptly. A dark mass lay behind roots. It resembled a fallen pear, he thought. The skin had shrivelled, so that its shape was lost, and it had sunk like a deflated, bristly sack. He did not look more closely.

They went on under the giant trees, and Peter noticed that a carpet of leaves had fallen. The plants were huge, like enormous, half-naked elms in a forest at winter time.

Ahead was Ivan's voice, calling them, urging them to be quick. . . .

"What can it be?" Judy wondered.

They hurried, and found the three standing on a high stump which appeared to have been a house. From its summit, Peter looked round. The glint of water was visible ahead, and the sun was rising in the eastern sky.

"Look away to the right," Allen urged.

The sun had touched the tops of the alien trees, and Peter saw that they were surmounted by a mass of silvery threads, immeasurably fine, stretching heavenwards. They shone in the sun, brilliant as down spun from metal.

"It is the seeding of the plants," Allen whispered.

The threads floated skywards, and Peter saw new seed-pods opening wherever the sun touched. The silvery sheen spread slowly westwards, and the tendrils began to float higher, gaining speed, until the whole heavens were filled with fleecy masses. Watching, Peter suddenly understood.

"Symes said they were annuals," he breathed. "Annuals seed once, then die."

It was for this Symes had planned, he thought. The dead sticks of the alien trees would rot and fall, leaving the Earth available anew for the good, green plants she had known before. The things that had bobbed and moved among the plants that fostered them would be no more. . . .

He watched the masses of silvery gossamer rise, receding towards the stratosphere. He wondered what complex molecular changes had arisen during the long years of their sleeping, so that now the minute seeds were being repelled out of the field of the planet's gravity. He wondered, too, what complicated changes would take place in space, perhaps while centuries elapsed, until the spores should descend on some other planet in some other star-system, there to repeat their strange life-cycle.

Stilled with wonder, they watched the silvery clouds drift away into space. The sun was high when the last had gone from sight. The same thing was happening as the line of dawn sunlight advanced, Peter thought. In twenty-four hours no seed of the alien trees would remain.

He noticed, now, how the trunks had a dried, dead appearance, and how the withered leaves were falling with a gentle rustling which filled the air with sound.

"Richard Symes was a brilliant man," Judy breathed.

Peter drew her arm through his. The sun shone on them, warm and brilliant, and slanted down through the surrounding plants, touching the earth beneath.

"There'll be work," he said. "Planning and scheming—but it'll be worth while."

He looked at them. Ivan, with his golden head shining; Allen, the smile that had never been totally absent now very clear on his face, and Sam Ravenloc, whose eyes twinkled as he looked at the alien trees.

"That's the end of them things," he said.

It was, Peter thought. The end of them—and also of the old way of living. But it was the beginning of new things.

Never again would he be half-machine, destined to a killing routine. Instead, he was an individual, with a destiny to carve out for himself and the woman at his side.

He pressed Judy's arm, smiling. "We'll make Earth our new Eden. . . ."

## THE END

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*All characters in this story are fictitious and imaginary and bear no relation to any living person.*

# projectiles

## BEST COVER

Congratulations on your cover! It's just about the best cover I have seen on any British sf magazine. It even beats any cover put out by two of your competitors who have held the lead for some years over here. I won't mention the yarns, they speak for themselves and are all excellent. Keep up the good work. Best wishes.

**KEN SMITH**  
(Newcastle on Tyne)

*We ourselves feel that our covers have improved considerably, Ken, and we thank you for confirmation. We are trying to improve them still.*

## A PLEASURE

*Planet of Power* was concise, scientifically composed and sensible to the layman. A good, well-written story. More of them, please. It is a pleasure to know that such writers as yours are doing good work to bring sensible scientific knowledge to the public mind. Thank you.

**G. OULDES** (Bournemouth)

## COMET'S PULL

In *Ten Years to Oblivion* Mr. Macartney says that Leyton's comet exerted sufficient gravitational pull to cause Menis to break up. But I always thought a comet had a very small solid portion; the tail and the rest of it being highly attenuated vapour. The whole would probably just give a planet an extra high tide.

**G. W. ROCKE** (Crawley)

*Some facts about comets: the average diameter of a comet is about ten times that of the Earth; many of them are bigger than the Sun. Comets' heads are seldom less than 15,000 miles in diameter, and the tails usually stretch for many millions of miles. They travel at anything up to 300 miles a second. In *Ten Years to Oblivion* one of these things hit Menis. The colossal momentum would be quite sufficient to destroy the planet. Clem Macartney didn't mention gravitation.*

## FIRST LETTER

This is my first letter to your magazine although I have read every issue from 1 to 14. I just wanted to ask you to keep up the good work. You have set a very high standard in science fiction. Another thing I like is the covers; don't for heaven's sake follow some other magazines and print glamorous women on the covers. They say it helps to sell the book, but I say a real sf fan will buy his favourite mag even if it only has the name on the cover and no illustration. Please keep to one full-length novel, and keep your book reviews.

**THOMAS BAKER**  
(Seaham, Co. Durham)

*Don't worry, Thomas, we have no intention of changing our standards. We believe that real SF readers are too mature to be pleased by glamour and that those who want that kind of cover don't want our kind of story.*

## PROGRESS

You have made so many improvements in your magazine that I feel you must be experts on progress! In that case, can you tell me what kind of progress we can expect in the design of rockets? I mean in the way of fuel and drive, not shape.

**BETTY MACAULAY**  
(Wimbledon)

*Thanks for the compliment, Betty. In answer to your query we feel that the present-day chemical fuel rockets will be superseded by ships with an atomic drive. But that will not be for a long time, as things look now. After that will undoubtedly come the ionic rocket—a ship that operates in deep space, never landing on a large planet. It's drive would be effected by a stream of charged particles (ions) of some heavy element like mercury. Each tiny particle would give an equal and opposite thrust to the rocket and the sum total of thrusts, while*

*being quite small, would be enough to move the ship in the vacuum of space. The ship would be under constant weak drive. In the remote future it is always possible that we will know so much about the properties of space itself that we can push it away from the rocket, so to speak, but at the moment that is almost in the realms of fantasy.*

## CONGRATULATIONS

I must congratulate you on the type of cover you are now using. That in itself is enough to sell the novel without any diving inside to find out more about it as with some books.

**G. A. FRANCHI**  
(Kirriemuir, Angus)

*We receive many letters about our covers, and those in favour far outnumber those with grouses. While that remains the case, we shall continue to publish covers of the type we are using now. Thank you for your compliments.*





## book reviews

**THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES** is edited by E. F. Bleiler and T. E. Diky and is published by Grayson & Grayson Ltd. at 8/6. The stories are all good, most are well above the average, and a few have a delightful vein of humour—even the one that ends: "... as he smashed her skull with the decanter"! Frederic Brown, Clifford Simak, Henry Kuttner and Robert Moore Williams are included among the top-flight contributors. The anthology is introduced by Vincent Starrett, who is now reading sf instead of detective stories!

**THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS** by Sam Merwin Jnr. is a fast, action-packed story about several planes of existence. A racy newspaper reporter, and his feminine (oh, so feminine!) photographer-companion, essay a few trips into these planes and find plenty to occupy their time. Most of all, the book attracts by giving us *real* people up against *real* problems that are inevitable from the scientific framework of the story—true science fiction. The book is published by the Doubleday Company at \$2.75.

**SPACE MEDICINE** is a fine publication put out by the University of Illinois Press at \$3. At this price, it may not be worth the money, but there is a paper edition which sells at \$2 and this is much more like it.

In spite of its high price—the book has only 83 pages—it is a must for everyone seriously interested in the biology of space. The sub-title is "The human factor in flights beyond the Earth," and it certainly lives up to it. Three of the six sections of the book are written by members of the staff of the Department of Space Medicine, USAF School of Aviation Medicine, Randolph Field, Texas. There is also a section of multi-stage rockets and artificial satellites by Werner von Braun, the former Director of the Peenemünde V.2 station.

**ROCKETS AND JETS** by Marie Neurath, published by Max Parrish & Co., Ltd., at 6/-, is a Parrish Colour Book for Children. The subjects of the title are covered in a most lucid fashion that will appeal to fathers and brothers. The diagrams are clear and bright, with just the right amount of explanatory text.

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